DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 643 EC 307 665

AUTHOR	Boyer, Katherine Lynn Williams
TITLE	A Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of Mentorships on New Special Educators' Decisions To Remain in the Field of Special Education.
PUB DATE	1999-03-30
NOTE	124p.; Ph.D. Dissertation, George Mason University.
PUB TYPE	Dissertations/Theses - Doctoral Dissertations (041)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Beginning Teachers; *Disabilities; Elementary Education; Faculty Mobility; *Mentors; *Special Education Teachers; Teacher Burnout; *Teacher Collaboration; *Teacher Persistence

ABSTRACT

This dissertation conducted a study that analyzed the impact of year-long mentorships on the decisions of nine new teachers of students with autism, hearing impairments, moderate retardation, and physical disabilities, to remain in the special education field. Mentors were recommended by principals but volunteered to be part of the support program, were paid an annual stipend, and participated in a 7-session training series. All mentors were paired with a new teacher in their area of disability and in a setting equivalent to their own. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. Two of the nine teachers stated that their mentor directly affected their decision to remain in the field of special education. One teacher moved into general education where she believed she would be more effective in facilitating inclusion. Each of the other new teachers stated that her mentor was indirectly responsible for her remaining in the field. All reported that other sources of support emerged as the year went on to supplement that of the mentor, but stated the mentor remained a source of contact for objective advice, instructional expertise, and information about procedures. (Contains 46 references, and 5 appendixes, which include the forms and schedules used in the study.) (CR)

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ED 438 643

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF MENTORSHIPS ON NEW SPECIAL EDUCATORS' DECISIONS TO REMAIN IN THE FIELD OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

Katherine Lynn Williams Boyer
A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

Committee:

Chairperson

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Director, Ph.D. in Education Program

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Date: March 30, 1999

Spring Semester 1999
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia

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A Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of Mentorships On New Special Educators' Decisions To Remain in the Field of Special Education

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at George Mason University

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Each of us comes to our work each day representing the intricacies of human experience that have molded us. While the strands of personality can be traced across a life, the unique nature of that personality reacts and interacts with the persons and events encountered. The results, inevitably, define who each of us is and the choices we make. I wish to acknowledge here those persons who have entered, and remained in, my life informing me, expecting of me, supporting me, enhancing me, and loving me. Each contributed in his or her own way to my entering the first doctoral level class believing I could finish and to making this program and dissertation a defining experience.

My parents Lawrence and Edythe Williams will celebrate their 57th anniversary on the day my degree is conferred. Throughout the years they have modeled reading and learning as fundamental activities, family as the foundation for all relationships, and trying a new flavor of ice cream just to see if you like it--and none of that has been lost on me. They created the mold into which all my experiences have been poured.

My husband Bruce came into my life when I was uncertain of my future and my role as a woman. He has stood by me as I came to know my abilities and passions and undertook challenges to create my life. He has never questioned my need for this program or the sacrifices required from both of us to accomplish it. I could never have finished without his support.

The nine teachers who shared their first year teacher experiences with me imprinted a respect for the challenges that new special education teachers encounter and admiration for the obstacles teachers overcome to bring the best they have to offer to each of their students. In the future, when I speak of the great pool of special education teachers, I will have faces before me.

The best teachers, the ones we remember, are those who never accepted less than our best, understood how little time they had to write upon our lives, and remain forever as shadows in our writing and thinking. They take what we bring to them and make us more careful thinkers, better at telling others what we come to know, and curious about what remains to be learned. Dr. Virginia M. Smith and Dr. David S. Weisman entered my life as I studied and trained to be a school psychologist. They taught me, chided me, guided me, and, on occasion, rewarded me by agreeing that I was right. Their understanding of the dynamics of experience and ability, insight into human nature, and grasp of the subtleties in human relationships were crucial to my becoming the professional I am. Their influence is seen in the section of this dissertation titled Difference is Fundamental.

Those who may be my last school teachers--the members of my dissertation committee--have brought to this experience unwavering support. Dr. Mark Goor, my chairperson, regularly demonstrated his respect and value for my opinions and observations while also including me in his own professional activities; Dr. Gerald Wallace saw repeatedly the value of integrating my professional work with that of my doctoral program goals and approved four independent studies so I could profit from that intertwining; Dr. Jane Razeghi, before anyone else, said, "Of course, you can do this" and supported me through the summers with her home, vacation, and cell phone numbers. Dr. Joseph Maxwell introduced me to qualitative research, opening up for me a way to tell and make sense of the stories of my dissertation. He is wise, insightful, a rigorous thinker, and a disciplined researcher. His influence is seen in Chapter 3, Research Methods, and as the framer of Difference is Fundamental.

Dr. James H. Croushore, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, hovers about me every time I set about the task of writing. My professor for five of my major classes as an undergraduate and my advisor, he honed my thinking and writing in countless papers from freshman through senior year. He was a gifted teacher who taught me that intelligence is not so much the capacity to learn as it is the capacity to wonder. His influence is on every one of these pages.

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF MENTORSHIPS ON NEW SPECIAL EDUCATORS' DECISIONS TO REMAIN IN THE FIELD OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Katherine Lynn Williams Boyer, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 1999

Dissertation Chairperson: Dr. Mark Goor

Eleven percent of special education teachers leave the special education classroom from one year to the next. With the increasing number of special education students nationwide and declining graduates in the field of special education, states and local school districts grapple yearly with the challenge of teaching positions that are unfilled or that are filled with uncredentialed teachers or teachers new to the field. This results not only in time committed to recruiting and training but also in ill-prepared or inexperienced teachers instructing students with the most needs.

Mentorships have been increasingly recommended as a means of retaining new teachers. They offer a trusting relationship within which a new teacher can build teaching competence and self-confidence. Teachers who complete their first year of teaching with a sense of satisfaction and competence are more likely to remain in the field of teaching.

This study analyzed the impact of a year-long mentorship on the decisions of 9 new teachers of students with autism, hearing impairments, moderate retardation, and physical disabilities to remain in the field. Mentors were recommended by principals but

volunteered to be a part of the support program, were paid an annual stipend, and participated in a 7-session training series for which they received licensure recertification points equal to a 3-credit college course. All mentors were paired with a new teacher in their area of disability and in a setting equivalent to their own, i.e., classroom or itinerant.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. Transcriptions of those interviews were analyzed for themes but also with consideration of the inherent diversity of the participant pool.

Two of the 9 teachers stated that the mentor directly affected their decisions to remain in the field of special education. Both cited the mentor's constant availability in the early months of the year when contentious IEPs were being held; one cited the ability of the mentor to provide a framework within which to organize the many details and expectations of an itinerant role. In the latter case, the teacher served students in many schools and felt, also, that the mentor provided a constant and stable point of contact.

One teacher moved into general education where she believed she would be more effective in facilitating inclusion. Each of the other new teachers stated that her mentor was indirectly responsible for her remaining in the field. All reported that other sources of support emerged as the year went on to supplement that of the mentor but stated the mentor remained a source of contact for objective advice, instructional expertise, and information about procedures. Each new teacher stated that the mentor contributed to her meeting expectations for herself and for her students and, therefore, contributed to her sense of competence, value, and self-confidence.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The unique demands on new special educators overlay those experienced by all new teachers (Magliaro, 1992). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirement for a continuum of alternative placements may result in a new teacher working in a setting for which she is not prepared (Brownell & Smith, 1993). The 1997 Amendments to the IDEA (IDEA97) stress the right of a special education student to have access to the general curriculum. For the new special educator, this means extra time and effort to acquire a broader knowledge of content and curriculum than training programs have traditionally provided. I have observed that advances in medical technology have allowed students with complex physical and mental disabilities to grow and participate in the educational process. For the new special educator this requires time to be spent scheduling complicated support systems that often include medical procedures. New special educators in focus groups over the years have told me that they agree with the IDEA requirements for assistive technology but that they must be involved in ongoing training so that these tools can be used effectively with students who cannot access instruction or demonstrate their knowledge without them. The tensions between educational traditionalists and other individuals involved in school reform and restructuring often focus on the special educator because of special education's extensive bureaucracy and separatist nature in many states and local education agencies (McLaughlin & Warren, 1992; Council for Administrators of Special Education, 1993). Well developed human relations and communication skills are essential to facilitate meeting their students' and parents' needs (Magliaro, 1992). Since preservice programs do not typically offer training in these skills, the new special educator must find time to consult with more experienced teachers or administrators to address these needs with sensitivity. Awareness of the complicated legal aspects of student and parent rights and procedural safeguards produces a level of stress unique to special educators, and increased community demands for demonstrated outcomes and accountability for the spiraling costs of special education add their own demands to the daily tasks of the special educator in the classroom.

The cumulative impact of these demands and other factors is reflected in attrition data showing that 11% of special education teachers do not return to that field from one year to the next (Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Weber, 1995). Retention strategies that address the reasons for special educators leaving the field of special education must be identified and evaluated for effectiveness to prevent this continuing loss of teachers specifically trained to instruct students with unique learning needs.

Background of the Problem

The training and ongoing professional development of special education teachers encompass not only fundamental teaching techniques and learning theory but also strategies to meet the unique learning needs of a variety of exceptional learners. The special educator new to the field struggles not only with the challenges of all first-year teachers but also with those aspects of the role that are mandated by the IDEA, including alternate assessment, leadership within individualized education program (IEP) meetings, and participation in multidisciplinary decisionmaking. In addition, the impact of the educational and sociological forces surrounding inclusion has dramatically affected the expectations for all special education teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 1994). Students who previously were in private day and residential programs and other more restrictive environments are now being instructed in public schools with increased opportunities for physical integration in general education environments and increased accountability for student progress within the general curriculum (IDEA97). Conversations with new teachers I met during recruiting revealed that current preservice training, which often includes a generic special education framework and an emphasis on teaching learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, or mildly retarded students, may not adequately prepare graduates for the challenges of more disabled students. In addition, student teaching and other on-site opportunities to work with these more challenging children and youth are, they told me, frequently insufficient. This occurs as a result of a school district's population or program designs or a community's lack of activities or programs for more challenging youth. These discrepancies between preservice training and the realities of the classroom challenges produce a heightened level of stress and sense of inadequacy for the new special educator (Boyer, 1996a).

New teachers need emotional support, guidance and feedback, assistance with management of student behaviors and the classroom, information regarding paperwork requirements, knowledge of the curriculum, guidance in lesson planning and student evaluation, and information associated with school routines and scheduling (Houston, McDavid, & Marshall, 1990; Howey, 1988). In addition, special educators are challenged immediately by issues of collaboration with general education colleagues; establishing a professional relationship with paraprofessionals; developing, recording and implementing IEPs; diagnosing and managing multiple achievement levels (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992); modifying the curriculum; identifying appropriate accommodations that may include alternate reading programs; ensuring that procedural safeguards for parents and students are routinely provided; communicating effectively with parents to establish appropriate expectations for their student; and advocating for students with disabilities to receive instruction in the least restrictive environment. Kueker and Haensly (1991) note as well that "in addition to the difficult and personally and professionally threatening experiences of all new teachers, special education teachers are often greeted by ill-equipped classrooms, limited supplies, an overwhelming amount of paperwork, and students of widely differing abilities" (p. 257).

Teachers choose to enter the field of special education because of the desire to help students who are educationally challenged, experience with or exposure to special needs populations, their attraction to the unique aspects of special education teaching such as smaller classes and more individualization, incentives, the influences of others in education and at times as a way to enter the field of teaching in general (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993). Since the average age of special education teachers is younger than that of general education teachers (Metzke, 1988), perhaps due to the higher attrition rate, their life experiences are potentially more narrow. Therefore, their motivation and commitment may be more tenuous as the realities and responsibilities of the role become clearer (Lauritzen & Friedman, 1991). They leave the special education field because of their work assignments, including the excessive paperwork and other interferences to teaching, inadequate preparation, the stress of working with students with disabilities, the lack of balance between extrinsic rewards and demands, unfulfilled intrinsic rewards, personal change factors, and the perceived and real absence of administrative support (Billingsley & Cross, 1991, Billingsley et al., 1995).

Purpose of the Study

Despite evidence of escalating challenges to new special educators and attrition rates that exceed those of new general educators (Billingsley et al., 1995; Billingsley 1993, Brownell & Smith 1993; Boe et al., 1995), the literature is lacking in research studies of well designed retention programs, plans or strategies (Brownell, 1992; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Billingsley, personal communication, 1996).

The success of the first year of teaching and the satisfaction it brings to the new special educator is critical to the decision to remain in teaching. Billingsley (1993) quotes from Yee (1990):

> The nature of novice teachers' assignments, coupled with the level of support given during the induction period, affects the speed with which professional competence and self-confidence are achieved. Teachers with positive novice experiences--

> reasonable assignments in terms of load and subject matter, adequate feedback, and, especially personal support from mentors and colleagues--are more likely to develop the competence and skills required for a satisfying career; teachers with more negative early experiences. . . are less likely to acquire the tools of the trade or to develop professional involvement and a commitment to staying in teaching. (p. 112)

The importance of assisting a new special educator to experience satisfaction, develop a feeling of confidence, and maintain emotional equilibrium throughout the crucial first year of teaching is compelling and suggests that school divisions should provide a significant support strategy to the new teacher during the entry year. In the field of education, a formal mentorship that provides emotional, instructional, and practical support for the new teacher is increasingly recommended (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; CEC, 1997).

Bas-Isaac (1989) notes that, when new teachers were interviewed, they stated that the three most effective sources of knowledge and skills were direct experience, consultation with other teachers, and observation of other teachers. Mentorships offer a context in which to provide these three opportunities, as well as others that give emotional and practical support. A mentorship is a teacher support strategy that is repeatedly discussed in the literature (Brownell & Smith, 1992; Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Furtwengler, Potthoff, Clark, Kline, & Alley, 1995). To date, however, the mentorships discussed have seldom been established according to best practices or examined systematically for their impact on the special educator's remaining in the field.

The purpose of this study will be to analyze through qualitative research methods new special educators' perceptions of the impact of a mentorship on their decisions to remain in the field of special education when the mentorship is designed according to best practices and provided during the first year of teaching in a special education role.

Significance of the Study

Multiple factors are known to influence teacher retention (Billingsley, 1993). These include external factors, such as teacher preparation, that have an indirect impact on decisions to leave, employment factors which include professional qualifications, work conditions, work rewards and commitment and, finally, personal factors. These components are often interrelated. Therefore, a mentorship--one of the employment factors--will likely be just one factor influencing a teacher's decision to remain in the field. However, given this framework of factors and the absence of research to date on the impact of mentorships on retention, analysis of a mentorship's relevance to the new teacher's decision to remain in the field of special education is timely. Hearing from teachers, as part of the interview dialogue, which components of a mentorship are most valued will assist states and local school districts in planning and funding retention programs and should guide teacher educators in designing preparation programs. Additionally, the reflections of teachers who had the advantage of a mentorship and the supports it brought, yet still chose to leave the field of special education, will be valuable. In those cases, the research interviews will allow for exploration of factors that did become relevant in the decision to leave after the first year of teaching.

Billingsley (1993) notes Kleinsasser's (1991) emphasis that teachers' perceptions and experiences are a critical missing piece of the database on teacher attrition. Billingsley

(1993) suggests that in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires offer special educators the opportunity to reflect on their attrition/retention decisions within their own personal experiences.

Mentorships that are carefully planned for and supported require the commitment of significant personal and financial resources of a state or school district. As an example, a formal mentorship is one component of the new teacher support program in the school district research site. Incentives for mentors include a stipend of $450.00 annually; semi-monthly training sessions taught by principals, other administrators, and a private consultant; and 90 recertification points--the equivalent of a three-credit college course. Principals and staff from the district's office of special education and office of staff development and training devote considerable time planning and implementing the program throughout the year.

Evaluations of the new teacher support program have been accumulated by the district's office of staff development and training, including reactions and value judgments regarding the mentorship component. Of 59 new teachers surveyed, 55 agreed or strongly agreed that they felt comfortable in approaching their mentor; and 52 agreed or strongly agreed that their mentor had provided both instructional materials and emotional support. Comments ranged from "Mentors are essential," to "Great mentor but she was too busy with her own work." The impact of the mentorship component on the new teacher's decision to remain in teaching was not directly addressed. This study will provide a qualitative analysis of teachers' perceptions of the impact that this mentorship, designed according to best practices and provided during the first year in a special educator role, has had on new special educators' decisions to remain in the field of special education. If new teachers perceive the mentor as essential to their decision to remain in the field, then the staff and monetary costs can be viewed as acceptable when weighed against the greater costs of recruitment, other less effective training and staff development formats such as inservices and workshops, and inadequate or inappropriate instruction of students. If that consistent perception cannot be demonstrated, the research site, as well as other school districts, may continue to provide mentorships for reasons other than retention; but that decision can be made with a better understanding of the issues.

Definition of Terms

The term mentoring, as used within this study, connotes a voluntary relationship between an experienced special educator and a special educator new to a role in the classroom where the mentor assists the new teacher in his or her professional growth by establishing a supportive environment (Wildman, Niles, McLaughlin & Magliaro, 1989).

Within this study, the term low incidence disabilities will refer to students with autism, moderate retardation, physical disabilities (other health impaired, orthopedically impaired, traumatic brain injury), and hearing impairment.

Attrition, for the purposes of this study, is the movement of a new special educator to a position in the school district that does not involve instructing special education students in the classroom.

Retention, within this study, refers to the decision of a new special educator to remain as a teacher of students with disabilities for the second year of his or her career.

CHAPTER 2

Conceptual Context

Introduction

The conceptual context for this research is represented by the literature and data available on new special educator attrition, strategies for supporting new special educators so that retention is enhanced including activities developed in the research site to define and address needs of new special education teachers, the organization and features of mentorships and the possibilities which they offer to meet documented needs of new special educators, and the research questions.

Attrition of Special Education Teachers

The literature related to special education teacher attrition and retention repeatedly notes the critical shortages of newly trained special educators as well as the loss of experienced teachers (Billingsley et al., 1995; Billingsley, 1993; Brownell & Smith, 1993; White, 1995).

Special educators leave the field of special education because of their work assignments, including the excessive paperwork and other interferences to teaching, inadequate preparation, the stress of working with students with disabilities, the lack of balance between extrinsic rewards and demands, unfulfilled intrinsic rewards, personal change factors, the perceived and real absence of administrative support (Billingsley & Cross, 1991; Billingsley et al., 1995), school climate, age, and certification status (Brownell et al., 1995).

Analysis of the data on attrition is hampered, however, by the discrepancy among definitions of attrition, i.e., did the teacher leave the field of education completely, leave special education for general education, leave one school division for another school division, or leave only to return after an absence of some years? In her comprehensive review of the literature on special educator attrition and retention, Billingsley (1993) notes the complexity of making comparisons when operational definitions are so disparate and recommends that researchers provide precise definitions of the categories of transfer and attrition used in their studies.

Unpublished papers from the National Dissemination Forum on Issues Relating to Special Education Teacher Satisfaction, Retention and Attrition held in Washington, D.C., in May 1995, do provide, however, comprehensive national information based on data from the early 1990s. Because data reported within those papers is from national databases, a more accurate picture of the attrition problem has emerged as well as clarification of areas where retention interventions might be most effective. In particular, the need to develop retention programs that target increased role satisfaction among special educators has been documented (Boe et al., 1995).

Boe et al. (1995) used the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the Teacher Followup Survey (TFS) of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in reporting their data. These two surveys allow for review of national statistics relative to special education teachers' retention in the special education field, transfer to another teaching field, and exit from the field of education. They report from that database that 11% of special education teachers who were employed in the field in school year 1990-1991 did not return to the field in school year 1991-1992. Of that 11%, 5% stayed in the field of education but transferred into general education. Ninety-two percent of special educators remaining in the field returned to the same school. From a school district's viewpoint, therefore, a new special educator's decision to remain in the field for a second year carries with it overwhelmingly the decision to remain in the school to which they were assigned. This allows for continuity of instruction and stability of school staff.

Brownell, Smith, and Miller (1995) defined leavers as those not returning to teach full time in a special education classroom in a K-12 public school system. That included those who accepted positions teaching in a grade-level class of general education students, i.e., those not receiving special education full time, those who moved to specialist or administrative positions, or those who left the teaching field entirely. From the perspective of that definition, they report that 22.3% of special educators who left a special education teaching assignment in Florida after school year 1992-1993 switched to general education. In an earlier study, Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, and Webber (1993) asserted that teacher turnover at the school level may be as high as 20 percent for special educators as opposed to 13 percent for general education.

Despite the complexities of interpreting attrition data that are often discrepant, the central issue remains. Special educators leave the special education classroom at a higher rate than their general education colleagues leave their classrooms, and this presents problems for principals and other administrators. Whether attrition means leaving a district special education teaching position or moving into general education, a school division is denied the development of an experienced special education teacher pool, must increase its recruitment efforts, and, most importantly, must answer to the community for whether or not those students with the greatest educational needs are receiving appropriate and effective instruction.

Strategies to Retain New Special Educators

Discussions that review or suggest retention strategies, including mentorships, stress the need for careful monitoring of new teacher assignments (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Kueker & Haensly, 1991), provision of adequate resources, and time and opportunity for new teachers to reflect on their teaching (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992) with experienced teachers and their own colleagues. These considerations are included in the discussion below.

Systemic reform. In 1995, Billingsley undertook research with the Memphis City Schools to address the retention of special education teachers. The effort resulted in a strategic plan that identified broad-ranging goals for school climate; working conditions of personnel in the schools; relationships within the school mainstream among all programs and personnel; and personnel employment, assignment, and professional development policies and practices. Certainly, systemic change of this nature that includes or focuses on the unique challenges for special educators holds promise for providing incentives that would keep special educators in the special education classroom or enhance motivation to return. The commitment of the Memphis City Schools to the strategic plan, however, is uncertain at this time (Billingsley, personal communication, February 1998).

Stress management and peer collaboration. Cooley and Yovanoff (1996) undertook two interventions designed to enhance schools' abilities to support and retain their special education personnel, focusing on the interventions' effects on factors demonstrated to correlate with employee turnover and retention, i.e., job burnout, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. They provided to 92 volunteer special educators and related service providers both a five-week stress management workshop that would teach coping strategies while broader systemic changes evolved and a four-week peer collaboration program that aimed to reduce the collegial isolation often noted by first-year teachers. In the latter program peer collaboration was substituted for the administrative support that first-year special educators feel particularly is lacking. Their results suggested that, following interventions, the treatment group members experienced increased job satisfaction and sense of commitment to their teacher roles and experienced less characteristics of burnout. As such, the two interventions show promise as retention strategies for special educators.

Research site initiatives. I devoted considerable personal and staff resources to support new special educators during the last three years. Personal conversations and local survey data supported the wide range of needs that new special educators experience during the first year of teaching, especially as they reflect expectations noted earlier in this research. These included organization of the district, writing IEPs and documenting progress, adapting instruction, collaboration with general education teachers, alternative assessments including data collection, and alternative reading and math programs.

I developed various responses to these stated needs. Each year for three years a cohort of new teachers was identified and used as a focus group to provide continuing feedback on districtwide process changes that were helpful and on additional needs for specific staff development opportunities and preferred formats. I initiated a quarterly newsletter for all special education teachers to communicate consistent information regarding broad systemic issues and training opportunities. The newsletter regularly included discussions of emerging trends nationally and the rationale for the district's decisions in response to those trends. A question and answer section focusing on issues associated with developing and implementing the IEP was also included. A two-day series for new teachers of students with low incidence disabilities was initiated, with these teachers being paid a stipend to report to work in August prior to other new special educators. Time was spent in orienting these teachers to instruction of students with significant academic, behavioral, and functional skill challenges. They also received information regarding the availability of assistive technology, referral procedures for consultations about assistive technology, and the library of software appropriate for their students. In addition, a five-part series was developed and implemented in the late afternoons during school year 1996-1997. This series addressed, in alternate months, topics identified by new special educators as those in which they did not feel sufficiently trained. These topics included classroom management, alternative reading and math programs, adapting the learning environment, and alternate assessments. Evaluations of this series noted the teachers' need for the information but the difficulty associated with attending after-work training. Teachers requested that the series be offered during the day, supported with substitutes. This was not possible, and the series was not repeated during school year 1997-1998. These experiences and activities have provided me with a comprehensive view of new special educators' daily challenges as well as a continuing curiosity about what must be made available to heighten their commitment and retain them over the years.

Mentorships. The Virginia Department of Education provided six years of support, 1990 to 1996, to statewide development of mentorships for special educators. The efforts were coordinated by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, and resulted in the establishment of a network of 94 local education agencies (LEA), and private and state schools that shared information, best practices and program progress. The Mentor's Resource Guide for Working with New Special Educators (Magliaro, 1992), developed as a part of that effort, delineates the purposes of these mentorships as providing support for the new special educator's needs in setting realistic expectations, having resources and materials, having time to plan, working with colleagues, and understanding one's role as a special educator. Research on the results of these efforts was never published (Magliaro, personal communication, February 1998).

White (1995) analyzed the impact of the Kentucky Teacher Induction Program (KTIP) on new special educators' plans to remain in the special education field. She concluded that no particular component of the program, i.e., mentor teacher, administrator, teacher educator, or the internship program, affected the new special educator's decision to remain in the field. Within this statewide plan mentors were assigned without the opportunity to volunteer, and new special educators were not routinely paired with experienced special educators. In addition, the mentor was expected to spend three hours during the year doing the required state observation that would be used in the decision to grant certification at the end of the new teacher's first year of teaching. White's data did suggest that, when a new special educator was assigned a mentor teacher from the field of special education, the new teacher asked for more help with and received more quality help for the concerns experienced during the first year in the field. The availability of that mentor was more influential in the decision to remain in the field than when the mentor was not a special educator. The design of the KTIP, including involuntary status of resource teachers and mentors, the pairing of non-special education mentors with new special educators, and the performance evaluation component completed by the mentor, does not represent best practice for mentorships, so conclusions must take that into consideration.

In evaluating the Teacher Conservation Project in the Houston Independent School District, Houston et al. (1990) state that, at the two months and eight months points, new teachers rated their experienced support teachers' assistance less important in their plans to continue teaching than the severity of their problems in the areas of personal finances, amount of paperwork, and lack of personal time. He does conclude, however, that first-year teachers who rate their support teachers as effective are more confident and satisfied and expect to have a longer tenure as a teacher.

At this time the literature on mentorships in education reflects inconclusive data on their effectiveness in retaining teachers. Thies-Sprinthall (1986) notes that even effective mentoring is not the single answer and that organizational environments and basic working conditions cannot be ignored. Smith-Davis and Cohen (1989) conclude that mentoring programs can reasonably be expected to increase the retention rate of promising beginning teachers and to screen out the least promising but cannot overcome school context problems related to misplacement, overloads, overcrowded classrooms.

Although not all mentorship experiences are viewed as decisive in the decision to remain in the field, Billingsley et al. (1995) note that receiving assistance from teachers was the aspect of colleague support that most influenced new special education teachers to remain in the field after the first year. Helping with student discipline problems, with instructional strategies and resources, and with obtaining services for students with disabilities were examples of how colleagues assisted first-year special educators. In addition, positive feelings about mentorships or mentor relationships have been directly related to reduced stress during the first year of teaching with results suggesting that retention was enhanced because of the mentorship (Kueker & Haensly, 1991). In looking back on her first year of teaching, Mateja (1992) found that the most important factor for her continued interest in the field of teaching was the support of her mentor teacher.

Evaluative data from projects that focus on or incorporate mentorships do reflect their success in providing emotional support to the first-year teacher and professional support in using instructional strategies and obtaining resources for the classroom (Odell & Ferraro, 1992). These and other successes typically occur when the mentor is trained in the skills required for the role, mentor and mentee are in close proximity, the mentor is experienced in the content or specialization of the mentee, the mentor teaches at the same level and sees the mentoring relationship as a sharing of new and old ideas based on experience and training.

Organization and Features of Mentorship Programs in Education

Mentorship programs demonstrate a wide variety of goals that range from attracting and retaining special educators new and experienced in the field, assisting state departments of education with personnel preparation programs, expanding knowledge beyond preservice training, acculturating new teachers, ensuring quality instruction for students and providing personal, emotional support. This broad variation of goals and purposes complicates analysis of data on the effectiveness of mentorships either as they exist alone within a state or district's teacher support system or as part of a larger induction program. Gray and Gray (1985) suggest that a formal mentoring program should have tangible and well-stated goals or purposes as well as required program evaluation components and documentation criteria. With the unique needs of special educators overlaying the challenges of all new teachers and the continuing shortage of well-trained teachers to instruct students with disabilities, mentorships offer a systematic means of addressing the training and retention issues so critical to the field.

Despite inconclusive data related to the impact of mentorships on teacher retention, there is widespread consensus on many points related to them (CEC, 1997).

1. Mentorships encompass opportunities for direct experience, consultation with colleagues and observation of other teachers, the three most effective sources of knowledge and skills as reported by teachers.

2. Mentorships provide emotional support to the new teacher.

3. Mentorships convey the culture of the school and district.

4. Mentor relationships lessen the sense of isolation experienced by first-year teachers.

5. Mentors must volunteer.

6. Mentorship programs must be well planned with mentor training occurring prior to the opening of school and throughout the school year.

7. Mentors facilitate the development of reflective practice in mentees.

Successful mentorship programs have well-established goals, are well planned and supported, and reflect a foundation of trust and confidentiality. As mentorship programs are developed, the features that follow should be included; for they encompass best practices and optimize satisfying relationships and expected outcomes (CEC, 1997; Lane & Canosa, 1995).

Features of Successful Mentorships

Purposes are clearly stated and assessable. Successful mentorships are designed, implemented, and assessed consistent with clearly stated purposes. Mentoring is not an end in itself, but rather a means to achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes. It is important that persons representative of the parties that will be involved in its implementation develop the purposes of the mentorship program. After the purposes and the implementing program are developed, it is equally important that all participants clearly understand and subscribe to the purposes.

Mentor criteria are clear. The development of a satisfying and successful mentor relationship rests primarily upon the quality and commitment of the mentor. Effective mentors bring to the relationship a desire to be a mentor, a history of successful teaching, a willingness to be open minded, flexibility in scheduling, knowledge of the school culture, the capacity to develop a trusting and confidential relationship, a nonjudgmental perspective, and active communication skills.

The mentor has volunteered. Mentorships require a commitment of time and an earnest desire to advance the professional development of a new special educator. Mentors who volunteer or participate in a selection process demonstrate their interest and determination to create a mentorship that is satisfying to both the mentor and the mentee.

Mentor training occurs prior to opening of school and through the year. Successful teachers bring valuable instructional experience to the mentee. Systematic mentor training should develop in mentors other skills, however, that are also important to a successful mentorship. Mentors should receive training in communication strategies that encourage sharing, clarify information and problems, facilitate problem solving, and support the mentee in an active and empathetic manner. Mentors should also be knowledgeable in characteristics of adult learners, the provision of direct instruction consistent with the developmental level of the mentee, and responsibilities within a leadership role.

This comprehensive training should begin prior to the arrival of new teachers, continue at regular and planned intervals throughout the year and include the opportunity for mentors to discuss concerns and issues with supportive colleagues.

There is a high level of interaction between the mentor and mentee. A well-planned mentorship includes regular opportunities for the mentor and mentee to discuss and plan. This often includes an agreed-upon time each week as well as a willingness and flexibility on the part of the mentor to be available, apart from the planned time, when the new teacher's need for support is particularly urgent.

The mentor has knowledge of and experience at the same level and with the same subject or specialty as the mentee. It is essential that the mentor have the knowledge, skills, and experiences that are necessary to meet the purposes of the mentorship. A mentor is a professional role model for the mentee and thus must represent to the mentee the professional he or she would like to become. It is also important that the mentor has experienced the current teaching situation the mentee is experiencing so that the mentor can give appropriate guidance. A mentor who can answer those questions from personal experience is at once more credible and valuable to the mentee.

The mentee and mentor have dependable and ready access to each other. While easy access to the mentor is an expressed desire of new teachers, this is not always possible due to variations in student population and dispersion of services. All mentorships should include, however, means of communication that allow the mentee to have questions and concerns addressed in a timely manner. These might include expedited telephone access, e-mail, planned coverage for classroom observations within the school and additional substitute allowances for observations in schools other than the mentee's.

The mentorship relationship is guided by mutual respect for professional views. A new special educator brings to a first or new teaching assignment experiences and training that will drive the mentee's practice in the early years. The mentor's role is to advance the professional development of the mentee. Pairing the new teacher with a mentor who shares or can be respectful of the mentee's knowledge, experience, and beliefs is important for instilling self-confidence and professional validation in the mentee.

Time for interaction is supported and provided. Effective mentorships occur when a high level of interaction occurs between the mentor and mentee. Time for this to occur must be supported by the building administrator and colleagues who are invested in the successful transition of a new teacher into the classroom. This support may include staff volunteering to cover classes of the mentor and mentee so that planned time together can occur, substitute coverage, or reduction in schoolwide assignments that are time consuming such as bus or lunch duties.

Mentoring is a highly personal and sustained relationship. Mentorship programs for special educators must be developed with an awareness of the individual, dynamic, and interactive nature of successful mentorships and a commitment to support both the mentor and the mentee through the duration of the relationship. While guidelines and best practices provide signposts for development of programs, the highly individualized nature of each mentorship must be respected and allowed to define the benefits that it brings to both educators as they move from teacher and student to trusted colleagues (Boyer, 1996b; CEC, 1997).

The best mentors bring to the relationship a history of successful teaching, a willingness to be open minded, flexibility in scheduling, the capacity to develop a trusting relationship, available time, a nonjudgmental perspective, and good communication skills.

Research Questions

The conceptual context presented here supports three research questions:

1. Did the mentorship you had during your first year of teaching have an impact on your decision to remain in the field of special education for a second year?

2. What characteristics of the mentorship had the greatest influence on your development of self-confidence and sense of competence as a teacher?

3. What were the influences of the mentorship during the first year of teaching?

CHAPTER 3

Research Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyze new special educators' perceptions of the impact of a mentorship on the decision to remain in the field of special education. Mentorships within this study have been designed according to best practices, i.e., mentors are volunteers, have no evaluative functions, are compensated, receive training, are easily accessible to mentees, and have experience in the same area of student disability as the mentee. The mentorships were provided to teachers of students with low incidence disabilities during their first year of teaching in a special education role. The mentorship was not a part of the certification or licensure requirements.

This chapter provides a rationale for the qualitative design of the research, a description of the setting of the research and context for the mentorship, data collection methods including participant selection, data analysis methods, and issues of validity.

Research Design

The nature of qualitative research requires that one approach the work with neither preconceived expectations of what will be discovered nor an intellectual rigidity that precludes acceptance of themes that emerge. The quality of a mentorship evolves over time as confidence within the new teacher grows and the mentor assumes the role of trusted colleague instead of teacher. In that way it is a dynamic and highly individualized relationship, reflecting the unique needs and personalities of the two individuals (CEC, 1997; Magliaro, 1992). Qualitative research is able to capture the richness of that growth and the complexities of the dynamics within the relationship.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) note that qualitative research allows for insight and for the personalization of the data through quotes from the subjects and exploration of the subtleties and nuances of reflections, reactions and descriptions. Qualitative analysis also allows for documentation of the constellation of factors that impact retention while providing methodology to sort for themes that are generalizable across schools and teaching challenges (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996).

Research Setting

Research was conducted with teachers of students with low incidence disabilities in a large, predominantly suburban school district that enjoys an historical commitment to special education. During the year of research, more than 145,000 students were instructed in more than 220 schools and centers in this school district. The school district's Department of Human Resources hires approximately 1,000 new teachers each year, at least 200 of whom are special educators. All but one percent of the 19,000 special education students are taught in the district's schools. The district has a conservative philosophy of inclusion, clustering students with low incidence disabilities in classrooms within selected general education buildings while maintaining three sites that are separate from general education for the most seriously emotionally disabled students at the secondary level. All 10,000 students with learning disabilities are instructed in their home schools, where the emphasis is on providing instruction in the general education classroom with team teaching, pull-out resource, or separate self contained content classes used as supplementary options.

Teachers of students with low incidence disabilities typically provide services to students through direct instruction in a self-contained environment and as support to the general education teacher when the students are included in a general education environment. Special education teachers with these responsibilities balance expectations of parents for additional inclusion opportunities and the teacher's own concern for attention to IEP goals that require individualized instruction, advocacy for their students to be in less restrictive environments, knowledge and use of assistive technology, and opportunities for generalization of skills to the broader community.

Because of the school system's commitment to expanding opportunities for students with disabilities in general education classrooms (FCPS, 1995), all schools have special education teachers on their staff. Opportunities generally exist, therefore, for a new special education teacher to have a support network within a school regardless of the area of disability being taught.

Because of its demographics and competitive salary structure, the research site attracts a broad pool of teacher applicants. In addition, it utilizes a carefully constructed interview process to identify those applicants with the most promise for successful teaching. This increases the likelihood that the 200+ new special educators hired each year will have demonstrated better skill development and preservice activities and a stronger profile of commitment to teaching than non-hires.

Despite these conditions, January 1997 data from this school district reveal that of the 637 new special educators hired for September 1990, 1991, and 1992 only 87% continued the second year in a special education field; and only 76% remained in a special education field for a third year. The cohort of teachers hired for September 1993, 1994, and 1995 showed figures of 88% and 77% respectively. Across all six years of teacher groups, 2.3% changed to a general education assignment by their third year of teaching, and 23.4% had separated from the school division prior to what would have been their third year of teaching. The final figure is 1.3% greater for new special educators than that for a matched sample of general educators. The research site's attrition data of 87%-88% for new special educators returning to a special education assignment the second year is comparable to the previously noted national figure of 89%, but its 2.3% for change to a K-12 public school general education assignment by the third year of teaching is lower than the national average of 5% transfer to a K-12 public school general education assignment.

This suggests that, even in an environment with optimal hiring components, an effective means of retaining new special educators to become the core of an experienced teaching pool should be developed and maintained. The characteristics of the research site appear to nullify certain variables, such as low pay, lack of materials, and district demographics that have the potential to affect retention.

Context for Mentorships at the Research Site

Ultimately the analysis of data from interviews will consider the structure and processes of the mentorship program that the 9 research participants experienced. Therefore, a description of the support program and its mentorship component appears appropriate.

The school district's new teacher support program was implemented in school year 1995-1996. At its inception, it focused on the needs of 100 new general education and special education (learning disabled) elementary teachers. Although the number of teachers has increased, it continues to include (a) a paid seminar/institute in August prior to the return of other new teachers, (b) monthly training in topics that are congruent with emerging needs of the first-year teacher (e.g., end of first quarter parent conferences are preceded by training in how to have an effective parent conference), and (c) a mentor. As noted in Chapter I, the mentor has volunteered, is paid an annual stipend, accumulates recertification points, and receives bi-monthly training to increase her or his skills in classroom management problems, conferencing skills, beliefs about professional practice, cognitive coaching and styles of mentor/mentee relationships. Mentors are selected after the school year has begun and school staff is confirmed. At that point, principals offer the opportunity to be a mentor to experienced teachers in programs and at grade levels consistent with those of new teachers. Best practice, as noted in Chapter II, includes selection of mentors prior to the opening of school. This is the only exception to best practices noted within this mentorship component and accommodates the flux in new teacher assignments that occurs in large school divisions through the end of the hiring period prior to school opening. The availability of a mentorship program designed on best practices provided an optimal research environment within which to explore its impact on teachers' plans to remain in the field.

Mentors to new special educators teaching students with low incidence disabilities were selected in a manner that was consistent with previous practice of selecting mentors for the new teacher support program. Principals of schools where programs for students with low incidence disabilities are established were informed in mid-August of the availability of the mentorships for new teachers in these programs. They were asked to consult with experienced teachers who indicated an interest in the role and responsibilities of a mentor and to recommend that teacher to the Office of Special Education Programs and Services and the Office of Staff Development and Training. The prospective mentor then completed forms that were considered by staff in the two offices. Staff accomplished followup through phone conversations. The selection process was completed after considering the following conditions or characteristics for each recommended mentor.

1. Teaching assignment during the mentorship in the same program and at the same level as that of the new special educator.
2. Evidence of at least five years as a successful special education teacher in the school district.
3. Teaching assignment in the same building as the new teacher (when possible).
4. Demonstrated desire to be a mentor.
5. Observed willingness to be open-minded.
6. Flexibility in scheduling.
7. Knowledge of the school/school district culture.
8. Capacity to develop a trusting and confidential relationship

9. Demonstrated non-judgmental perspective.

10. Effective communication skills.

Subsequent to notification of their acceptance, the mentors arranged to meet with their new teachers and established the framework for schedules, roles, expectations, and needs. Mentors then began a seven-session training series covering the topics noted in Appendix A. Throughout that series, the trainers integrated the following considerations with the new skills and knowledge presented in each session.

1. Were mentors using communication strategies that encouraged sharing, clarified information and problems, facilitated problem solving, and supported the mentee in an active and empathetic manner?

2. Were strategies for teaching adult learners being applied?

3. Was the direct instructional assistance being offered consistent with the developmental level of the mentee?

4. How was the mentor fulfilling her responsibilities within a leadership role?

5. Were communication options including journals or logbooks, informal interactions, planned meetings, classroom observations, phone conversations, e-mail, and Internet being used effectively?

Data Collection

Maxwell (1996a) cautions against the fallacy of assuming that the research question by itself determines the data collection method. Rather, he notes, the researcher must first determine what information will assist in answering the research question and then select a data collection method. For this study, face-to-face interviews were selected as the format for data collection. This method provided an opportunity for new special educators who participated in the school district's induction program and, therefore, had the experience of a mentor to reflect broadly on their experiences. Their reflections were expected to provide an understanding of the teachers' deeply personal experiences of the first year of teaching children with low incidence disabilities and descriptions of the impact of events, impressions and relationships on their decisions to remain in or leave the field of special education teaching. Furthermore, the interview format allowed respondents to convey the fundamental belief structure brought to teaching, the complexities of the new teacher's role, the specific challenges for a new special educator, and the emotions of either meeting and overcoming the challenges of the year or experiencing failure in a much-planned-for role.

In the pilot study done in November 1997, the themes that emerged from three interviews were (a) organization of teaching roles, (b) instructional levels in a school, (c) mentor selection process, (d) lack of preparation for the teaching role, (e) growth of teachers during the first year of teaching, (f) expectations of first-year teachers, (g) schedule for mentor-mentee meetings, (h) characteristics of the mentorship, (i) affective state of new teachers, (j) mentor commitment, (k) personal characteristics of mentor, and (l) environment of school. These themes reflected the types of concerns that new special educators bring to mentors, particularly as they vary over the year, and the characteristics of the mentor and that relationship that contribute to the decision to remain in the field of special education. Data from that study provided direction for the derivation of the following interview questions which guided the interviews during the research.

1. What drew you to the field of special education?

2. What personal expectations did you have for the teaching experience?

3. What successes did you experience during the first year of teaching in special education?

4. In what situations did you feel the most frustration?

5. What support did you find during the first year of teaching, i.e., from where did the support emerge?

6. What form did this support take?

7. What was your mentorship experience like?

8. What characteristics of your mentorship had the most impact on you?

9. How did your mentor help you realize your expectations for the first year of teaching?

10. What part did the mentoring relationship and process have in your decision to return or not return to teaching in special education?

11. Did the nature of your students' disability influence your decision to stay (or leave)?

Approval for research was obtained in April 1998 from the human subjects research committees at George Mason University and in the school district. Agreement to participate in the research (Appendix D) was received from each teacher following written invitations (Appendices B and C) and, in six cases, a followup phone call from me.

Although the data collection occurred within the timeframe of June through November 1998, the teachers' availability and appropriateness for the research had been established earlier.

Beginning in mid-July through mid-August 1997, a welcoming letter was sent from the Office of Special Education Programs and Services to each newly hired teacher for students with hearing impairments, autism, moderate retardation, or physical disabilities. This letter offered a 2-day paid workshop on August 19 and 20, prior to the reporting of other new teachers, and the opportunity to participate in the year long induction support program. The latter included the 13 session series for which salary credit points were offered (Appendix E) and a mentor. A commitment to the year long program was not required to attend the workshop. Teachers who were new to teaching and those who were experienced but new to the school district were included in the pool receiving letters. Thirty seven letters were sent; twenty four teachers responded, and eighteen teachers attended the workshop. At the workshop, participation in the year long program was again offered; and commitments were requested.

Following the workshop, as final hires were accomplished, principals called to ask if a teacher hired after the workshop could be included in the year long support program, and a letter offering the program was sent to that teacher. Fourteen new teachers of students in the above categories attended the first meeting of the cohort that would remain in the support program for the entire year. Four of that group were new to the school district but experienced teachers so ultimately they were not considered for the study. Ten of the group were new to teaching during 1997-98 and were contacted in May 1998 to participate in the research. Nine agreed to be interviewed. One did not respond to written or phone requests to participate.

Interviews were tape recorded and generally lasted one hour. To maximize the interviewee's comfort with the interview situation and enhance the ease with which reflections and observations were offered, interviews took place at the new teacher's site of choice (Seidman 1998). Four took place at the special education central administration building, four took place in the teachers' schools, and one took place in a school that was not the new teacher's but was convenient for each of us. In the latter case, the teacher was uncomfortable discussing her mentor in a building where she might be seen with me. The interview was guided by the questions referred to previously in this chapter.

I maintained notes on the interviewee's personal presentation and orientation to the interview, response style, elements of the environment that were relevant, and words or statements that suggested further questions. Although the conversation was guided by the questions stated earlier in this chapter, teacher statements often suggested other lines of questioning; and those were pursued. This occurred often around the issue of inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classes and the difficulties this presented for the new teachers who did not have relationships developed with colleagues at the school. Followup phone calls were completed with seven of the nine participants. Two did not return phone calls left at their homes and schools. Each of the conversations was 10 - 20 minutes in length. With the two participants who stated their mentors had a direct impact on their returning, I verified the statement. During all the conversations, I discussed and verified the conclusions of my research regarding the ongoing role of their mentors and the teachers' expanded network of resources. During the phone calls, 3 responded spontaneously that they remained in contact with their mentors and continued to view them as sources for information.

Throughout the interviews I was encouraged by the interest and enthusiasm that each teacher demonstrated and felt always that I was providing an opportunity for a unique story to be told.

Data Analysis

Data was transcribed from the taped interviews, coded and analyzed through identification of themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Responses converged around challenges experienced during the first year of teaching, types of support new special educators need during that time, sources for that support, the characteristics and value of their mentorships, and the impact of the mentorship and students' disabilities on their decisions to remain in the field of special education. Teachers spoke as well about the varied and diverse paths that had brought them to special education, the appeal of that field, and their commitment to the children and their families. Interviews often touched on the fundamental belief structure brought to teaching, the complexities of the new teacher's role, the additional challenges for a new special educator, the emotions of either meeting and overcoming the challenges of the year or experiencing failure, and the impressions of a relationship that exacted its own expectations from both the new teacher and the mentor.

Analysis of the data for themes failed to capture, however, the startling emotional component of this research. Each teacher revealed repeatedly in her responses a remarkable commitment to the education of her young students with disabilities. This level of commitment was both unexpected and compelling and is discussed more fully in the section on Difference is Fundamental in Chapter 7.

Issues of Validity

Reactivity, the influence of the researcher on the environment and subjects within the research, is a common threat to validity in qualitative studies (Maxwell, 1996), and was anticipated. In this study, that potential for influence was complicated by my position as director of special education in the school district that is the site of research. This heightened the possibility that the teachers who were interviewed would be reluctant to provide responses that they believed would reflect poorly on them as teachers or as participants in the district's new teacher support program or on their mentors. The potential for this interference was addressed through the participant letter, which ensured confidentiality of interview notes and tapes, the absence of any communication on school district stationery, and my manner of dress on days of the interviews. I do not supervise the teachers who were interviewed, and they know that. I did not have a part in selecting the teachers or their mentors for the support program and mentor component; teachers were not necessarily aware of that. Mentor assignments to teachers had been done in September 1997 by a person on my staff, so I did not have knowledge of which mentor had worked with each new teacher. Teachers interviewed within the pilot study did not appear to be affected by my position and provided answers that reflected both positively and negatively on their own mentors.

Researcher biases were considered in two specific areas. The data presentation included a case study format which highlighted, in each of Chapters 5, 6, and 7, one teacher whose experiences captured the theme of each of those chapters. My selection of those case studies as representative of the data and not simply personal favorites needed to be explored. Second, the unexpected emotional component of the research became an important part of my research conclusions; so review of any preconceived theory I may have brought to the research was important.

In the three chapters which included case studies, I concluded that I drew multiple references and extracted numerous quotes across the interviews to support the theme of each chapter. The choice of a case study was based on the breadth of a particular example, unusual insight offered by the teacher, and articulate rendering.

While I do bring to my work a belief that teaching children, especially those with disabilities, is done best by those who feel drawn to the field, I had no preconceived theory about the presence of commitment or passion. Indeed, during the focus groups I held over the years with new teachers, the conversations focused on what more needed to be done by the school district to relieve their frustrations and lack of preparation to meet challenges. In the pilot study done in November 1997, themes around passion and commitment did not emerge from interviews with those three teachers. It is noted, however, that questions for the current research interview were revised following that pilot study. In reviewing the interviews used for this research, those themes were established through observation of teachers' body language during the interviews, choice and emphasis of words, and repetition of phases related to passion and commitment.

This research investigates the impact of mentors on retention when the mentors are volunteers, have been well trained, are compensated, and have been selected by someone other than the new teacher with whom they will work. Mentorships that are spontaneous or lack those components were ignored. This invites criticism of the conclusions.

CHAPTER 4

Finding My Way to the Classroom

Introduction

Teachers choose to enter the field of special education because of the desire to help students who are educationally challenged, experience with or exposure to special needs populations, their attraction to the unique aspects of special education teaching such as smaller classes and more individualization, incentives, the influences of others in education (Billingsley, Pyecha, Smith-Davis, Murray, & Hendricks, 1995; Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendricks, 1993), and at times as a way into the field of teaching in general. An individual event may have been the touchstone, occurring unexpectedly but producing those critical questions that shift a course of study, a life's plan, and an understanding of oneself.

A university teacher training program can become, then, a catalyst for changes or the next step in a planned-for career. Each university teacher training program is, however, a reflection of both the requirements of the state in which the institution is located and the philosophies of those who instruct and train within the program. As a result, future teachers prepare for their first teaching experience in diverse ways. States such as Virginia require that teachers enter the field of special education with a teaching certificate and endorsement in the category of disability being taught. Other states, such as

New York and Pennsylvania, award teaching certificates that provide a generic endorsement in special education. Course offerings and sequences in a training program match those requirements. Student teaching experiences vary from working side by side with a general educator serving all children's needs in a classroom to those that provide little opportunity to do much except take one or two children out to the resource room for remedial but individualized instruction.

Regardless of the reason for choosing the field or the content and experiences of their preservice training, new special educators converge on a common environment each September seeking to act on their commitment to children and to share a professional passage. The purpose of this research has been to explore the perspectives of that passage, particularly as it included the support of a trained mentor, through listening, questioning, observing, and taking in the passions, anxieties, fears, frustrations, hopes, and realities of 9 new special educators.

This chapter describes the diversity of the group that shared their experiences with me, their reasons for becoming special educators, the environments in which they lived their first year of teaching, and their unique perspectives on that year. Two subsequent chapters will discuss in detail the dominant themes that emerged from the interviews: Drawing on Supports and Emerging as a Teacher. The seventh and final chapter, Continuing the Journey, will address and draw conclusions focused on the subject of this research, what the impact of the mentorship was on the decision to remain in the field of special education, as well as other research questions regarding impact of the mentorship on self-confidence and sense of competence and the influences of the mentorship.

Powerful emotions emerged during these interviews and throughout the research. They are presented in vignettes and case studies to enrich the discussion. In their aftermath, it is hoped that this and other research will find ways to retain these and other committed young teachers who come eagerly to the field but then leave forever the children they cared about so deeply.

Characteristics of the Study

The 9 new special educators in this research taught elementary students with autism, moderate retardation, several levels of hearing impairment, and physical disabilities. They were all in their first year of teaching. Seven of the teachers were based in classrooms; two were itinerant teachers. The itinerants provided instruction to no more than 16 students across assigned schools. All were women, and all were younger than 30. Two of the teachers were themselves hard of hearing; one was Asian. All 9 returned to teaching this year. One transferred from special education to general education.

The mentors were all women with more than five years of experience teaching in the new teachers' areas of disability. Each was recommended by her principal or supervisor but volunteered to be a mentor for the whole school year. The mentors received $450.00 and 90 licensure recertification points for the required seven-session training series.

Each mentor was teaching in an instructional setting that matched the new teachers, either classroom or itinerant. In only 3 cases, however, were the mentors in the same building as the new teacher being mentored. Eight mentors were teaching or had taught at the same grade level as the new teacher.

Participants in the Study

Claudia. In the afternoon of the last day of school, Claudia had forgotten our interview and was moving books from one room to another in preparation for her summer school assignment. Before she knew I was there, however, I had a chance to watch her and another teacher as they laughed together with that sense of freedom that comes on the last day of a school year and traded jokes about their final experiences. "Oh, my gosh, I forgot you were coming," she said as I moved into her classroom filled with round tables low to the floor, computers, papers remaining to be sorted, chairs out of their proper places, and scattered books and materials that are the work tools of teachers and students. "I'm sorry about the looks of the place, but things were a little disorganized today." Claudia's mentor taught in the classroom next to hers. They had known each other from the previous year when Claudia had worked as a substitute in the building.

In the beginning of the interview, it was hard for Claudia to talk without occasionally signing at the same time. Claudia works with preschool children in a center for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Their parents have chosen this particular center because it teaches their children to communicate through signing, instruction that can begin as early as there is a diagnosis. Claudia is also hard of hearing so signing for herself, as well as with her students and other deaf or hard of hearing staff members, is natural. Fortunately for us, her spoken language was understandable if I listened carefully; but she has long been planted in both the hearing and signing worlds and knew to ask if I understood what she had said and paused often to say something in another way.

Claudia brings to her children and their parents a deep and personal understanding of the dynamics in a family that has a deaf or hard of hearing member. "To this day, I don't really get support in any way from my family. No one in my family signs, so a part of my job, and this is what I love about the parent-infant stuff, is that I really involve the families and show them you do this for your child. Sometimes, I'll tell them a little bit about my background to show them how much their children will appreciate the things they do. They will cry and say, 'I can't sign. . . ,' and I say, 'Every little thing you do for them, they may not know it now but later when they meet other kids [who are deaf], they'll know and appreciate it.' So, that part really means a lot to me, so that these kids can have a good relationship with their families, they won't be angry and resentful."

Alison. Alison came unexpectedly to the teaching profession. As the daughter of a teacher in a family of teachers, she wanted to do something different, to reverse the tide of professions, to put a personal stamp on her chosen work. She was a biology major who took a special education class and knew immediately, "This is what I want to do."

A teacher's day is much more than being in the classroom. She must form relationships that make her a part of the school and allow her to be more effective for her students. For special education teachers, there is always the organization of the day with so many different teachers having a part of the child's education. Unexpectedly, there are the custodial duties: lunch duty, hall duty, buses coming and going, arranging for trips. I found Alison on the curb of the bus lane waiting for the end-of-day bus with her first-grade class of four students with autism. Even that, though, was a teaching experience; and I watched as she took care to keep them a safe distance from the bus lane, stooping low to get the focused attention of a student at his level so the cautions would be heard and the behavior affected.

As we settled into two small chairs, Alison was tense and ill at ease, stumbling over her answers to questions about herself and why she came to teaching. As we moved to her experiences with the children, though, she became the teacher she thought she would never be. Wanting me to understand how she engages the children, she was animated in explaining that she establishes an environment that enhances joyful learning by stressing reading and the sciences but structuring continual opportunities for interaction. "I think the kids like it in here. I think the kids enjoy coming. . . . I guess I'm not as strict as maybe some think I should be, but they're having a good time and they're laughing and we still get all our work done." She is proud of the progress of these children who instinctively impose non-productive structures on themselves through their repetitive behaviors, necessitating an environment that substitutes productive behaviors within a structure that can appear stifling to the outsider. In this classroom of her making, though, the children thrive and learn to know each other as friends. "It's not like, I mean they definitely have their schedules and their roteness, but it's good to see John say, 'Steven, will you play Candyland with me?' and to see them going down the slide together on the playground." Her face glowed as she concluded, "Two weeks ago we were outside and one of the kids got all of the kids in my class to come down the slide. So they all got on the slide, all four of them, made a train and they all went down the curvy slide together. And I mean that was just great for me. I mean that was just one thing that I'm really proud of. I'm glad that this room has that environment so that they can grow that way."

How does her mother feel about Alison becoming a teacher after all? "Well, whenever I say that I wish I could get this but I don't have enough money, she's says, 'I told you so.' But I think she's happy for me. She does hope I don't burn out and that later I won't wish I had more money. Just mother stuff, I guess."

Barbara. Barbara responded early to my first letter requesting participation, carefully noting on the Agreement to Participate form that she would be away for the summer and supplying her home phone number at the time, the number where she could be reached during the summer, and the promise to call me in August with her new home phone number if we did not connect before then. This kind of efficiency and organization proved to be essential in her first teaching position as an itinerant teacher serving 16 students with a variety of physical disabilities in grades three through 12 across five schools. Her mentor, who was also an itinerant serving physically disabled students, was based at the same site as Barbara and had a matching style of organization, which Barbara felt was very reaffirming.

Barbara was introduced to children with special needs as a high school student when she stayed routinely with a child who was profoundly retarded as a result of a severe seizure disorder. The experience was made positive by parents who trained her and then trusted her to care for their child. She had completed three semesters of student teaching. One was specifically for children with physical or other health impairments, another was in general education, and the third was in early childhood. Her endorsements in multiple levels and different educational strategies and curricula provided her with an impressive background to work in changing environments, across disabilities, and with various instructional strategies.

She understood intuitively that she could be effective as an itinerant only by developing rapport with the staff in each school. "I figured that could make or break you if you [couldn't] go into an environment and be supported by your co-workers. So, I was reliable; they knew when I was coming. I returned phone calls. I was willing to go into the classroom to help even though I was generally pulling the student [to work on specific skills]. If they needed me in the classroom to kind of help with the bigger lesson that the whole classroom was doing, I was willing to jump in and do that as well. I was flexible, and I think that helped a lot [to develop rapport]." With an assurance that belied her young age, she laughed and said, "I became very organized and very structured and lived out of my planner. I gave myself a lot of hints and cues in there, like the names of each of the principals, the secretaries, the lead teacher, the children's teachers--you've got seven for each kid in middle and high school--and then how to get to the building!"

She sensed, too, that she could serve as a buffer for teachers because of her itinerant status. When a problem arose that required the principal's time and intervention, she could make the request. "If the LD chair was having problems with a student that we both served, but she didn't feel comfortable approaching the principal, I could do it. I mean, I get to leave. They can be angry or upset at what I have to say, but I get to leave. So sometimes I am a good person to have to take the heat for the intermediate work. Like, I pushed to have a handicapped accessible door that would open to the building and to find out who in the building would do bathrooming for the students and who was the backup for that. This was a school that hadn't had these types of issues before and they were real hands off. So, I could keep asking the questions without having to be around while people got frustrated with all the time it took to make those things happen."

Sharon. When Sharon went to college, her only concern was that she would not like studying the education of the deaf. "I thought if I get to college and I don't like this, I'm out of luck because my whole entire life, it's all I ever wanted to do. I have no other interests, I don't want to be anything else. Luckily I loved it when I went."

Sharon had congenital barriers to hearing until she was three, when an operation restored her hearing. She admits that that may give her a more intuitive understanding of the multiple ways her students must receive information as well as their difficulties. "I had to go to speech therapy every other day for seven years, so I know [what they feel like and what's happening] when they go to speech therapy. I know because I was there for just as long as they've been doing it."

Sharon came to the field of deaf education, though, because her neighborhood elementary school, which she attended, happened to house a center using a total communication philosophy, including signing, for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Although she could hear by then and was well on her way to acquiring appropriate language, she says, "I just loved [the signing], and I learned signing when I was in third grade and ever since I always said the only thing I ever wanted to do was work with deaf and hard of hearing kids. I just wanted to meet every single one of those people at the center that signed and I did. I made a point of doing that and then when I went to my neighborhood high school where that group of students went also, I was a student assistant in the deaf and hard of hearing program, so I worked with some of those kids."

Sharon's clear focused style emerged in her forthright, succinct answers that left her looking at me after each response with a smile that said, "Next question." Despite the uncertainties about school procedures and special education processes that she admitted to having during her first year of teaching, she brought to the children a manner that conveys, "I know what we need to do." For any child, but especially one who is hampered by a hearing impairment and unable to navigate his or her own way in the language of personal advocacy, there is great security in having a teacher who understands your needs and speaks clearly with only the necessary words as she goes about taking care of those needs.

Sharon spent her first year of teaching with fifth graders in a center for children with hearing impairments that has an aural-oral communication focus. Their hearing deficits are generally such that oral language can be acquired through augmentative communication devices without the need for signing. Although her mentor was in the building, she taught preschool students, so Sharon found much of her support during that first year of teaching from sources other than her mentor. Sharon never faltered during her first year of teaching and never considered not coming back to the field she had trained for in many ways since she was six years old. Sharon uses her expertise in signing as a private certified educational interpreter, but her sparkling eyes and expressive manner no doubt enhance whatever her hands are saying.

Brenda. "I'm the kind of person or teacher," Brenda said, "that likes to see the lightbulbs go off in their heads." When she discovered, during the student teaching associated with her degree in elementary education, that students with varied disabilities were in the classroom but not experiencing many lightbulbs, her reaction was, "How can I reach them?" The answers began to come as she took on a year's course work in special education that supplemented her six-year pursuit of a master's degree in general elementary education.

Brenda rested one elbow on a chair arm and kept her hands in her lap as we sat in a school conference room at the end of a day in June. Her mentorship experience had not been wholly positive, and she asked not to meet at her school to avoid the possibility that the mentor would happen upon us together. Turning the chair from side to side ever so slightly, she reflected on the end of her first year of teaching and the lightbulbs that her seven students with moderate retardation had experienced. "There is something magical in special ed because, even though I was making small gains and small progress, it's that small progress that is a huge milestone for a kid. You know, one of my kids this year, actually two of my kids this year, learned how to feed themselves. And the first time that one of my kids picked up a fork by himself and put it into his mouth, here I am running to get the Polaroid camera and just taking pictures, and I am sending the pictures home to mom, and I am making awards and going around telling everybody." Impressing upon me the import of her feeling, she leaned forward in her chair and earnestly confided, "But nobody else understands, you know, only my staff understands. To me that's what's magical about it. Even though it is such a small gain for you and me, to somebody else, it is a huge gain." There was much ground yet to be covered in our discussion, but nothing that came later carried the crystal clarity of that revelation or provided a surer window to the soul of a teacher we need to keep.

Leslie. Leslie, an Asian American, speaks movingly of her personal epiphany after working unexpectedly in a therapeutic summer camp. In our conversation, she returned again and again to the fundamental changes that experience created in herself and her inability to shake away the needs of the children with whom she worked.

"I did have big, very difficult first quarter because I had to deal with the things that were left from preschool program. All the advocates came to kindergarten program and didn't matter what I was doing. They already had some issues they wanted to deal with in the county. It was beyond what I even thought of or heard. And people were telling us, "That's beyond anything I've experienced in fifteen years of teaching." They were advocating for the county to open up a new program closer to this child's home, because his bus ride was 40 minutes. I knew it was going to come very soon; they just didn't want to wait." Leslie admits to being amazed at the impatience in the face of so many things that were provided to the students. "Back in Korea, I was born in Korea and came to US when I was seven, seventh grade, you don't see that many kids with disabilities, you don't see that many people with disabilities. They are hidden someplace or you just don't see them. But [the advocate] came in to observe my class, to see how he was doing. I guess they wanted to pick on what was wrong and, you know I really, really thank God because she couldn't pick on anything that was wrong. So during the IEP meeting--I think there were 15-17 people because, this advocate is pretty well known from the newspaper--she came in and pretty much said, 'You know, I really can't say anything that's wrong with what Leslie's doing with [the child]. I think her progress report really describes where he is functioning.' I was so nervous I wanted to cry! Things like that, grad school can't prepare you for; no one can prepare you on things like that."

Leslie's articulate, impassioned description of working now with her own classroom of young children with autism and their parents left me forgetting to breath at times. I felt I was in the presence of a palpable force for good and was grateful that it was working for children with such needs.

Nancy. Nancy smiled quietly and said, "I expected them to be more deaf and I expected to have fewer students." Instead, Nancy, who came to the field after seeing the movie Children of a Lesser God, spent her first year of teaching as an itinerant serving twelve students who received services in their local schools. The severity of their hearing loss was such that none needed the complex array of instructional support available at a center program. They did require, however, a knowledgeable person to check their hearing aids, consult with the classroom teacher on supplementary materials, review seating arrangements in the room, and monitor their progress toward IEP goals.

Those expectations were eased into reality as the early weeks of the year went by and Nancy became immersed in the daily events of providing service. The challenges that persisted were those that she admits, "You didn't learn in school but wish you'd learned. They teach you kids and theory of education, but as far as special education and all the rules, regulations, and laws--you know you learn the base of all those but actually how to use them and work with them? That's another story." Nancy struggled also with the logistics of serving students in many schools that are some distance from each other. She said with a laugh, "I still carry my map! I just found out last week that I was going an extra 20 minutes to a school when I could have zipped up another road." She saw her acculturation to the district as a significant accomplishment for the year. She had not only learned the geography of the school district but also who to call when she had a problem with a hearing aid, an IEP question, the modifications for a new instructional standard, or the expectations of a parent. She could observe, from a year's perspective, that being an itinerant fostered the dual emotions of feeling both overwhelmed by the details of multiple school assignments but isolated from lack of a school to call her own. It had given her opportunities, though, that other new teachers had not had. "Sitting down to do IEPs with so many different schools and people. I think it's good because I feel like now I can run an IEP better than I've seen a lot of people run them who've been here a long time, but in the same school. I've seen so many, and I've seen great people do them. So, I can say I like this way; and I don't like this way. I just feel like I know much more than a lot of people."

Nancy is one of only three of the teachers whose mentor met with her regularly. Because they were both itinerants, they met on Wednesday afternoons at the district site that houses their group of itinerant teachers.

Betsy. "I started working with students with autism sort of on a bet. One of my friends said, 'You could never work with autistic kids, you could never do it.' So I worked with my first child with autism and decided that this was what I wanted to do." This was only one in a series of epiphanies that Betsy had had, though, on her road to an autism classroom. Stopping once during the interview to remark, "I'm so tired--it's been a long day," she nonetheless told a compelling story that started, as special education often does, in the basement. "When I was in junior high I volunteered to help one of my teachers who was the coach do the report cards, you know stuffing envelopes and stuff. We were on the main floor, but the special education classes were in the basement hidden away. Well, during the times that I was an office helper, they would come upstairs to the gym for PE classes by themselves. I mean no one else could be in the [gym]. And I kind of felt sorry for them that they were down in the basement, and I didn't understand why. So then when I got to college, I was majoring in psychology but took some collateral courses in special education and an Intro to Exceptional Children. I had a really good professor and started to do some fieldwork experiences. The irony was that I was doing more work in those classes than I was in my psych classes. You know, I thought about it, well you know if I am doing all this work it must be that I really like it, so I became a special education teacher -- and went into autism on a bet! But now it seems like what I am supposed to do; it just seems natural."

Betsy taught five- and six-year-old students with autism in a clustered classroom in a general education building. Her mentor taught in another school and mentored four teachers spread across three schools. There were inconsistencies in meeting times, so Betsy found herself talking with others in the school and using her own common sense to solve problems as they arose. The parents of Betsy's students were wonderful. They supported her and helped out when the children would go into the community for instruction. She discovered that these were opportunities to teach parents as well as students that the children could accomplish more than expected.

"I think in the home environment it's really difficult to focus so much on how the child is eating rather than just that he is eating. So, eating with a fork might not be a goal at home, but it certainly is at school. So when we were out, I just kind of modeled the way that I wanted them to do it, and the parents did pick up on it. I could just show them how you could get your child to eat with a fork, how not to throw something across the table. And, also, there's a time to eat and there's a time to play and we do things as a family, if you will. As a class, we don't get up from the table until everybody is finished eating. Now that's something a lot of parents didn't understand at first, but I think they realized after awhile what my goal was and I think it helped solve a lot of problems at home once they could see that. It really was a benefit to the parents to come."

Mary. As we talked, Mary pulled her hands into the sleeves of her sweater and occasionally pulled the collar up onto her chin. Talking about herself seemed threatening, and, from time to time she would apologize for the language she used, fearing she had offended me with the blunt vernacular of her generation--'cut to the chase' language.

We sat in her classroom within empty halls on a Friday afternoon after school as she explained why she had to leave special education to become a general third grade teacher. Mary was trained in a program that stressed general and special education teachers working in the same classroom and then created student teaching experiences that exemplified that teamwork. "It was a really radical program," she noted, "and now that I am in the classroom full time, I see how really radical it was." She came to her first teaching job with the expectations of her training. She found instead a faculty that resisted including her young students with autism in their classrooms, reducing her to buying teachers' favor with offers to do menial jobs for them--laminating or making copies--or to give them special materials she had. Mary moved to general education because that was where she could do the most to include students with disabilities. As she shifted in her chair, looked around the room, and pulled her sleeves up and down, I saw the energy that fuels her teaching. This 24-year-old woman knows what she is about and wastes no time in trying to get there. Four years earlier she had unexpectedly encountered an idea that brought together the pieces of her emerging philosophy. "I was intrigued by how they would have all of the kids in the same classroom. I read a lot about it, and I thought it might work. And then I started seeing my own kids in the classroom and it was working." Her subsequent actions speak for the simple luxury of knowing at that age what it is you wish to spend your time doing. It allows a focus of energy and a refinement to decisionmaking. Mary knew by mid-year that she would move from special education to general education. She had worked hard to have her few students included in general classrooms, finding only two teachers in the school who would even consider it, and knowing " . . . that I had to go." She looked me straight in the eye and said, "I just knew that if anyone had come to me I would have said 'yes,' and not enough people were saying yes."

The move was not without a sense of abandoning what she loved, however; and she spoke with great emotion about the morning she had to tell her mentor, who came from another school to meet with her every Wednesday morning, that she was "crossing over." As she struggled to find words, repeating herself and imploring me with her eyes to understand how difficult her decision had been, I experienced her struggle to reconcile the philosophy that defined her with the realization of where that had to be lived. I knew that this was not only a teacher in her first year of teaching but an example of a new breed of teacher who will build the inclusive environments we now envision. For Mary this will not be a new way of teaching she has to learn; this will be the only way of teaching. She and others like her will change the face of teaching.

CHAPTER 5

Drawing on Supports

Introduction

Preparations begin in late spring or early summer for the August orientation of teachers new to teaching or new to a district. Rooms are booked; schedules are developed so the Superintendent and School Board can be present; materials are ordered; topics for presentation are identified. Videos may be prepared, or special speakers engaged. Throughout the summer, as contracts are finalized and principals fill vacancies with names and faces, the excitement of meeting and welcoming these new teachers increases. When they come together, the school district wants to convey the many ways it can support them. Curriculum specialists give grade-level or subject-specific inservices; human resources staff consult about health and insurance plans; principals plan breakfasts; panels of experienced teachers tell their own stories of what to expect and how it can be survived. Then the children come, and the classroom door is closed; and the new teacher is there alone with the children, with the responsibility for their progress during the next 10 months.

Throughout the interviews, the teachers' need for extensive concrete support during the first year of teaching emerged time and again, reflecting the commitment of these teachers to the education of their young students. While the help was for themselves, they were only the conduits. The help was, in fact, for their students; for without the information, assurance, resources, and personal contacts the teachers needed, they knew the children would not be well served.

To convey the breadth of needs noted by the participants and the supports that emerged to meet those needs, this chapter has been divided into four sections: Challenges, Types of Support Needed, Mentorship as Support, and Other Sources of Support.

Challenges

Learning the system. Some school districts have only a few schools. They are easy to find even if they are far apart, and sources to contact for information are few. An experienced teacher or principal knows who to call for help. The research site is a very large school district, however, with an inch-thick staff directory of who is responsible for what. All teachers in this research spoke of the frustrations around learning the system, i.e., how did the various layers relate to them as teachers, who should they call for a specific problem, and where were other schools or sites for training or meetings. Barbara captured this as "One of the most frustrating things is just not knowing the ropes--not knowing exactly the ins and outs and who are the channels I go to--the chain of command kind of thing. I actually said to someone the other day that we need an information person. So if I called and said, 'I need to get a hold of person A, they would give you the number instead of trying to figure out are they in the personnel section or the bus section." Nancy resorted to reading all the manuals and going to all the classes offered to her just to find out who to call. "This [district] is huge compared to [where I trained]; you could go crazy trying to learn the system and know who's out there to call."

Development of IEPs. Although the IDEA mandates who will be present to develop an IEP, my experiences in two school districts have taught me that the procedures vary for informing those persons of the upcoming IEP meeting, including specific information in the document, and making decisions around placement in the least restrictive environment. Some states may add requirements, and local school districts vary the forms on which the information is written. Five of the 9 teachers discussed their apprehensions and anxiety around the legal requirements of IDEA and the IEP in particular.

Although she had ended the year unscathed, Claudia laughed as she remembered those early IEP meetings. "I really thought the paperwork was going to be terrible. Everyone said, 'You have no idea,' and really I didn't. It was just like this big scary thing. I wasn't worried about dealing with parents or kids, just the procedures, the legal stuff. They say to you, 'The files have to be just so; we'll get audited; we'll get in trouble.' That's scary!" For Brenda, though, the fear was compounded by anger. "I had my first advocate for a student that was homebound, and I didn't know that she was an advocate, nobody told me that she was coming to the IEP, so I really wasn't prepared for it. I think we were out of compliance because the original homebound teacher had quit and the county couldn't find another one. So the child went without services and I was responsible for writing an IEP on the spot for a little girl I had never worked with before. That was really hard for me. Because after I finished writing the current level [of functioning] for this little girl I had never met, everything just ripped apart. And even though my principal was there and the [district] team leader, it was hard because in [the advocate's] eyes here I was a teacher who was writing this IEP and never met this girl before. After the IEP meeting, I walked out of the meeting, and I was holding everything inside, and I was just so upset."

Instruction. The IDEA provides for students to be identified with one or more of 13 specific disabilities. The perpetuation of these categories places teacher education programs in the awkward position of designing programs with competing foci. They must consider the categories as distinct from each other with unique populations to serve, while at the same time identifying and addressing the commonalities across disabilities that have emerged in practice and the literature (CEC 1996). Because training programs, within and across states, reflect state endorsement requirements and the research or philosophies of their professors, new teachers often experience the contradictions of their training and the demands of classrooms or schools whose programs and practices are not consistent with that training. For example, new teachers who have been trained at universities where there is a strong commitment to teaching phonemic awareness as a pre-reading skill are frustrated in a school district where the research in that area is not valued or incorporated and they see children not progressing because of it. At times, as well, the lack of opportunities to use course content during a supervised experience in the field leaves the new teacher unable to apply theory to meet the demands and needs of a child. These instructional challenges were noted specifically by 6 of the teachers but resonated throughout the interviews, mirroring both Magliaro's (1992) data on new teacher needs and my own needs surveys done with cohorts of new teachers in the school district.

Despite her consummate poise and preparation, Erika's words were sharp and clipped as she said, "I really didn't know how to teach anybody how to read, and I had a kid in fifth grade who didn't know how to read and I didn't know what to do. I just had no idea. I was frustrated because he was so frustrated. And I would get the easiest book, but, you know, teaching him about ancient Egypt when he can't even read the Cat in the Hat, I didn't know what to do. Do I teach his IEP and those are the goals and objectives that I have to teach him, so forget the social studies? So I just didn't know. I really had no idea."

As an itinerant, Nancy was uncertain about her instructional role with students who were routinely included in general education classes. "I had questions about working in the classroom because I didn't have so much of that in my [student] teaching. We had talked about it, how all the little kids were mainstreamed or included; but once I got in [the classroom], what was I supposed to do besides just helping someone out? How am I supposed to work on [their IEP] goals when they're doing something else?"

For Brenda, who had asked, "How do I reach them?" when first confronted with children who had complex learning needs, she found it hard ." . . to structure a classroom, to look at the kids on an individual basis and figure out what techniques and strategies for each of them [would help me] meet the needs of each one everyday. My kids were so involved that they all needed one on one all the time to do any intensive instruction, whether it is picking up a block and putting it in a bucket or self-feeding skills--anything is very intensive. I needed instructional techniques from someone that was in the program, definitely."

Behavior management. Over the years new teachers have repeatedly told me that knowing how to manage student behavior, through successful reinforcement or substitution of an appropriate behavior, is a skill that often eludes them and that its absence adds to their frustration. They see inappropriate behavior as a continual disruption to the instructional environment, undermining instruction and preventing children from making progress, while also leaving themselves exhausted at the end of each day and discouraged about returning the next day. In these interviews, 5 teachers spoke specifically to this challenge.

When asked what her greatest frustration was during her first year of teaching, Claudia knew immediately. "There was a child who had just terrible behavior problems. Dealing with her and her family was just crazy. She'd throw things; I was black and blue; I had scratches on my face, but they wouldn't send her home. I'd say, 'She can't stay, she's a danger.' She'd throw chairs, she tried to throw my teacher's chair. That was when I'd say, 'That's it, that's it.' I'd be in the office, 'I quit. I quit.'"

For Alison, who struggled throughout the year with her feelings of not being strict enough, behavior was also a frustration. "There was one boy who wanted to touch another boy all the time, just because he liked him so much. I was frustrated because I knew that he liked him and he was trying to interact and we were trying to find the appropriate things. He was getting into trouble because he wasn't doing any of his work and wouldn't leave [the other child] alone. He was so wrapped up in him. My biggest frustration was finding that balance between letting them do their own thing to be able to grow but not letting it get out of hand. I just really didn't know what to do with him."

Paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals are frequently a significant part of the special education staff in a school district. They assist with preparation of materials to meet the individual needs of students, extend the teacher's instruction through followup activities, and more and more facilitate the inclusion of students in general classes through support for a modified curriculum or maintenance of a behavior plan. They may present unique challenges to a new teacher, however, if the paraprofessional has been in the classroom with the same students for some years or is significantly older than the teacher. Establishing a relationship that is respectful of the paraprofessional's experience but clear about the teacher's role as the instructional leader requires finesse and astute skills in human relationships. Six of the teachers spoke about the relationship they had with their paraprofessionals and the challenges of establishing appropriate roles and responsibilities regarding support to students and to them as teachers.

Sharon acknowledges that she enjoyed such a successful first year partly because of her exceptional paraprofessional, but Brenda's experience required time and effort to manage and presented as a significant challenge. "I went into a situation where my assistant was there prior [to my coming]. She had been there for four years so in many ways she was a co-teacher. And that's wonderful if that worked for them. But, in a lot of ways that didn't work for me. I think I envisioned myself coming into the classroom, setting it up, you know, how I felt it should be set up, and sitting down with my assistant and sharing my philosophy and all the wonderful things that I want to do, and it just wasn't like that at all. I came into my classroom and my assistant had already set up the classroom for me, you know, 'This is how it was done last year, and this is how we do things.' It's good now, but it has taken me a year to kind of set the tone and find my professional role, to feel out how much authority do I have. Am I this person's supervisor; am I responsible for what this person does? I didn't know that in the beginning, and I had to figure that out along the way. But at the same time trying to keep that professional relationship because you are in the classroom with [them] and you have to establish a good rapport and you have to be all on the same page."

Types of Support Needed

The participants spoke with an urgency and specificity about their needs, responding without delay to specific questions or inserting their comments spontaneously at other times. Those needs were grouped in three areas: (a) administrative or operational, (b) emotional or moral, and (c) instructional.

Administrative. From the interviews, I identified administrative needs as those associated with learning about or becoming acculturated to the district. Teachers needed to know where to take the money when students had a lunch charge, how to find and prepare for a substitute, who arranged transportation for a community trip, how to fill out report cards. Claudia laughed and said, "You know, they don't teach you 'Filling Out Report Cards 101.'" Because of the legal implications of the IEP, these new special educators wanted help with writing IEPs. They struggled with wanting a voice of experience sitting with them in early meetings, while wanting also to be seen as capable and knowledgeable of the student and the process. They all repeatedly noted that the mentor's support was important in the development of IEPs. At times, the mentor held a pre-IEP meeting with the new teacher, reviewing the process, demonstrating how to structure and conduct a meeting that included multiple participants, and advising on potential goals and objectives for the student. Mentors sat in on IEP meetings at the request of the new teacher, particularly in the beginning of the year or when the child's program suggested contentious issues among the adults present. The mentors provided much needed oral support and reinforcement, relating problems the new teacher was experiencing to those they had had and assuring that "everything will be OK."

New teachers needed to know, also, who to call with a question about a modification to the standard curriculum or a strategy for delivering instruction. They needed someone to keep them on track and tell them what they needed to be doing--what forms were required, and what happens at certain points of the year. Itinerant teachers needed to know how to get a mailbox and where to get a photocopy number. Brenda spoke of needing to know how to respond to parents who were struggling with issues she had never experienced. "I had two little boys who were identical twins with Down's Syndrome. They are the neatest kids, but they are a handful. During the first half of the year, the mom was pretty quiet. Then in March she called me up one day crying that she [couldn't] do it anymore and wanted to put the kids in a residential placement. So, here I am a first-year teacher with no idea what to say to her or even how to handle this. My heart just fell on the floor."

Emotional. Other needs were those requiring emotional or moral support. Teachers needed to know, "I am not alone." They needed someone to talk to, to share successes and frustrations, to listen. They needed a door that was always open, immediate access to help. From Sharon's perspective, “I needed someone when I wanted to complain about something, or if I was really proud of something--if I got a good observation. I needed a friend who was always there, no matter what time of day it was.” They wanted to be told they were doing fine, to be validated for good thinking, poise under pressure, the success of their students, their competence as teachers, and being needed in the profession. They spoke of needing help with prioritizing so that the overwhelming details of the job did not undermine their enthusiasm and focus. They wanted advice, but they needed it to be non-judgmental and respectful of them as persons and teachers who had worked hard to be where they were and had ideas of their own that they wanted to try.

Instructional. I have watched in workshops and inservices as new teachers struggle with learning the district's comprehensive curriculum, aspects of modified curricula for students with certain disabilities, or a curriculum focusing on essential life skills for students with complex disabilities. During the year of research, teachers also grappled with increasing demands to be familiar with the state's new Standards of Learning and their associated tests and the expectation that more students with disabilities would be included in the state assessment system with accommodations as appropriate.

The teachers in the research were instructing students whose disabilities and their impact on learning were familiar to them through coursework and student teaching experiences. Therefore, the task of providing accommodations to the curriculum was manageable. They all noted, however, that they needed ongoing instructional support and felt it was most helpful when it came from someone experienced in working with children whose disability was primarily the same as their students and who taught or had taught at the same grade level.. Barbara, whose students demonstrated physical disabilities emanating from congenital or accidental causes, noted, "[My mentor] knew physical disabilities. She could give me information on a different diagnosis and its effect on learning." Sharon's mentor, on the other hand, lacked expertise in teaching fifth graders to read at a basic level so could not offer advice or materials. As she noted, "My mentor was a preschool teacher, which was fine when I needed help with finding something going on at school; but when it came to fifth grade problems? She became one of my great friends last year, but as far as helping me out with curriculum type things or problems when it came to fifth grade work, it didn't work out."

As with any professional, a teacher acquires over time special techniques or strategies to use in certain situations. These are the rewards of experience, but the new teachers needed them before they themselves had had the time to discover them on their own. They needed to see other teachers in action in their own classrooms, and they needed someone who was not an evaluator to watch them teach and offer feedback and suggestions. Because of their participation in the new teacher support program, mentors and new teachers had built-in substitute days. These were often used by the mentor to observe in the new teachers' classrooms, to have the new teacher observe the mentor in her own classroom, or to organize visits together to other sites so that new teachers could view established classrooms and talk with the mentor about what had been observed.

In addition, the new teachers needed behavior management support so that a specific student's behavior did not interfere with his or her personal academic progress, that of others, or opportunities to be included in a general classroom. The itinerants spoke of needing to know how to address their students' IEP goals within the instruction of the general classroom and where they, as professionals, fit into an educational picture that is focused on educating the whole child and not just the disability.

Mentorship as Support

New teachers typically looked first to their mentor to provide support for meeting their needs across all areas. Over time, however, the structure and characteristics of the mentorship (see Figure 1) often determined whether that support remained as primary or became only one of a number of supports sought and used by the new teacher.

Same teaching role. The importance of the mentor's being in the same teaching role, i.e., classroom or itinerant, was alluded to by five of the classroom teachers but noted particularly by the two itinerants . Barbara noted, "She knew my job. She knew what it was like to go from school to school. I really think it was very, very, very important." She added, also, "When I talked to a couple of the other beginning teachers, like LD teachers, their mentors were in the building but not doing what they were doing. They were librarians or doing something else, and it wasn't very helpful. So, after hearing from them, I think having your mentor do what you do is very important."

Teacher	Area of Disability	New Teacher: Classroom or Itinerant	Mentor: Classroom or Itinerant	Mentor teaches same disability	Mentor teaches same grade level	Mentor in same building
Alison	Autism	C*	C	Yes	Yes	No
Betsy	Autism	C	C	Yes	Yes	No
Brenda	Moderate retardation	C	C	Yes	Yes	Yes
Barbara	Physical disabilities	I*	I	Yes	Yes	Both are itinerants
Claudia	Deaf/hard of hearing	C	C	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leslie	Autism	C	C	Yes	Yes	No
Mary	Autism	C	C	Yes	Yes	No
Nancy	Deaf/hard of hearing	I	I	Yes	Yes	Both are itinerants
Sharon	Deaf/hard of hearing	C	C	Yes	No	Yes

Figure 1. Characteristics of mentorship. *C=classroom-based teacher I=itinerant teacher serving students in more than one school

Evaluation responsibility. White (1995) researched the Kentucky Teacher Internship Program (KTIP) which included a mentor teacher as support for the new special educator. This support teacher was a primary evaluator during the first year of teaching, which White reports as a threatening and stressful experience for the new teachers. Likewise, all teachers in this research reported their relief in knowing that their mentors would not be evaluating them. In her response to a question regarding whether the mentorship experience would have been different had the mentor been an evaluator, Nancy noted, "Yeah, definitely. Knowing that she didn't have [input to my evaluation] meant I could ask anything or get anything from her. I was a little nervous in the beginning when she was sitting in on my IEP meetings; but after it got going it was fine, because I knew it wasn't that she had to be there but that she was there to help me if I needed it."

Proximity. In their review of the literature on principles underlying mentoring, Furtwengler, Potthoff, Clark, Kline, and Alley (1995) note that proximity, grade level, and subject area repeatedly surface as the three key selection or matching criteria. They conclude from the research on these aspects that proximity or geographic closeness enhances more frequent communication, thereby reducing the impact of infrequent communication on development of the relationship. They report that, in their own qualitative research that included discussion of the proximity issue, there was a dichotomy in the responses of the 8 new special educators who participated in the research. Six believed that benefits accrued from having their mentor outside of the building. The mentor could provide an objective viewpoint that was not tainted by knowledge of the building culture or the dynamics of the staff within the school. New teachers also believed there was less likelihood that discussions would be repeated within the building.

Teachers that I worked with in this research struggled with how to maximize their time with mentors who were outside of their buildings, but having the mentor in the school did not guarantee an effective relationship. Of the three new teachers who had mentors in their building, only one had a satisfying relationship that included multiple supports. Although Leslie remarked enthusiastically, "[Having her in the building] would have been just awesome because that way I could just stop by every morning just to talk to her about things," her mentor, in fact, came to her building regularly after school from September through November to assist Leslie with very troublesome issues. Leslie herself expressed that, after the first quarter, they saw each other less regularly but stayed in touch by phone frequently.

Mary's mentor was not in her building either but provided specific support for instruction through regular Wednesday meetings and phone calls. Mary says, "She was inspiring and brought a lot to us, but we had her home phone number and we were constantly calling her if we had questions. I think we had so much support right in the building with, along with her, that it was okay. But I could see how it would be for people who don't feel supported in their own building that it might be a problem."

Scheduled meetings. Three of the new teachers met with their mentors at a scheduled time once a week. These meetings were characterized by attention to lists of administrative and student issues that both the mentor and new teacher had developed during the week as well as more spontaneous dialogue around followup to previous concerns, strategies to use with certain children, and the continued professional growth of the new teacher. All three new teachers who had these meetings expressed the value of knowing that, regardless of the events and schedules of the week, there was a time when questions could and would be addressed. These meetings were frequently supplemented, as has been noted, by phone calls and ultimately e-mail as teachers in the district gained access to the internal server.

Those who did not have a regular meeting time differed in their satisfaction with the more informal communication of dinner meetings every three or four weeks, phone calls as needed, or remaining to talk after other meetings. Betsy, who had expressed her frustration with not having a school team that was intact and professionally supportive of each other, remarked, "We didn't meet regularly, which I wish that we had. It just didn't work out that way. We probably met maybe about once every three or four weeks, which wasn't really enough. When we would meet, we would meet like in a restaurant and just sit down and talk about all kinds of things. I know that meeting once a week is a lot to expect, but even if it were just for an hour, just to say this is where I am at and this is what's going on. Do you have any suggestions for this or that? Having a set time would have made a big difference."

Barbara felt comfortable with the informality of her mentorship but, again, attributed that to the fact that she had support within her teacher team that allowed her to get the information or support she needed from a secondary support source. "Our relationship was more informal I think. Primarily, it was kind of I call her if I need something. She didn't really seek me out because we were doing different things, and I was comfortable with that. And, my [teacher team]--if she wasn't there, I would still feel very comfortable talking to [one of them] so I didn't feel like I was just dangling. If all else failed, though, I knew there was someone I could kind of come to."

Acceptance and reinforcement. Across the interviews, new teachers spoke of the value they placed on their mentor's nonjudgmental assistance, the mentor's capacity to help without directing. Mary captured the feeling: "I was just so impressed with how much she knew about her kids. I was like, wow, she knows everything. And she was always trying; that really impressed me about her. When I was at my wit's end, I said, 'I don't know what to do.' She was like, 'Well, did you try this?' She always had [a suggestion], but she was never condescending." Claudia expressed the same feelings, "She had a really nice manner the way she made me feel like I'm a competent teacher. There'd be days when I'd say, 'What am I doing, I'm not teaching this kid right, I'm not getting through.' And she'd say, 'NO, it isn't you, you know.' She made me feel like I was okay. She was very, very respectful. She would ask me what I thought. She'd say, 'Do you have an idea or what do you want to do?' I always felt like we were the same; I just had more questions!" Nancy felt also that her mentor never told her what to do. "Even from the beginning, it was like, 'I'll show you what I do, but will you show me what you are doing so I can learn.' Then she'd pick things up and say, 'Oh, I like your idea; maybe I'll do that, too.' She was always asking me questions, too; and it just started out that way."

Even for Brenda, whose mentorship was not satisfying, the impact of her mentor's comments were important. "I knew it would be a lot to get a compliment from her, but she did give me [one]. She told me that I was doing a great job and she told me that she had seen a lot of progress in my kids. I was just taken aback. I was in shock, but I felt like she really meant it. I know it took a lot for her to say it so I took it to heart and took it seriously."

Eight of the teachers noted that the mentor was a continuing thread, a stabilizing presence, who served as the primary source of support early in the school year and then took her place among other resources for support that the new teacher identified in a widening circle of personal and professional contacts.

Other Sources of Support

Brenda believes, as did all the new teachers, that maneuvering through the district was difficult because of its size. The converse of that, she stated, is that special education is "cushioned" with many different people from whom to get answers and support. These new teachers used all the resources they could identify. For many, the principal or assistant principal was a vital link in helping the teacher expand inclusion opportunities or bring in specialized assistance from another site. The reading resource teacher helped with specific instruction for a student who, as a fifth grader, was a non-reader. The English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher provided books and materials at various reading levels. District staff who had specialized knowledge of curriculum, instructional strategies, behavior management plans, or practices in other schools came regularly to schools and presented monthly training through workshops or inservices. District special education team leaders offered valuable help with reevaluation processes, legal questions, development of IEPs, and connecting the teacher with other resources. For Sharon, her assistant was the most helpful in making certain that she got through the first year successfully. "She knew everything, and she took care of everything. When she told me she had gotten another job and wasn't coming back this year, I almost fainted!"

Seldom is a person able to meet all the needs of another, and this was certainly true of the mentors. The broad need of new teachers for administrative information, instructional knowledge, and emotional nurturing requires a support network that develops over the year and eventually extends through the teacher's career. The mentor is

Drawing on Supports
Claudia

The odd thing was that she had this attachment to me based on my attention to her, so if I looked away to another child she would have a breakdown. So I needed her to be away from me because I had other kids in the classroom, so very upsetting. So I called everyone I knew. I got the psychologist, the social worker, the ED specialist, everyone and we finally worked out a behavior, a positive reinforcement behavior plan. We had to teach her that her time with me was positive time and that she had to be good. Before, I was the one [disciplining her and responding to her behavior] so it was always me, me , me all the time. She was getting what she wanted. So, as soon as there was the first hint that she was falling apart, my assistant took her out so she wasn't with me.

Solving that kind of problem really takes everybody. I got support from my preschool team, definitely from my preschool team, all the specialists who work with my kids, the speech [clinician], the audiologist, the principal, the secretary, the custodian. Just everyone was really helpful. The lead preschool teacher next door, who was my "unofficial mentor," always had a suggestion. She'd say, "When I have a kid like that, this is what I do."

I didn't wait for someone to offer help, I just asked for it. I mean there's no point in just sitting there because the help was right there. Sometimes I'd say, "I really need to talk to you about this kid because I'm going crazy so what do I do? What would you do?" Then we'd share, we'd plan together. People have great ideas. This year hasn't been so bad for me because of that. It hasn't been the black hole I thought it would be.

Figure 2. Case study: Claudia.

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in a unique position of being the touchstone for the year though. She is able to watch the teacher mature, moderate the support that is needed, convey hard earned experience, and sit knee to knee to say, "We need you." And the new teacher listens.

CHAPTER 6

Emerging as a Teacher

Introduction

During the first year with their own students, teachers demonstrate a predictable evolution to professional competence, consistent with the Menninger Morale Curve. Within Moir's (n.d.) adaptation of the curve (Figure 3), teachers begin with great anticipation, excited to be taking their place in a classroom. Shortly, however, their idealism and high energy are assaulted by the reality of skills required to meet the needs of the children and the daily demands of the profession. They enter the survival stage (Fuller & Brown, 1975), where they are preoccupied with their adequacy as a teacher and control of the classroom. This precipitates a downward curve of disillusionment that continues by degrees until early February when a period of rejuvenation begins. This latter period continues its ascent throughout the spring as the new teacher reflects on the many challenges that have been faced and overcome and anticipates the end of the year.

The ease with which the teachers in this research maintained the momentum to be positive, proactive and productive during the predictable stages in the first year of teaching is a result of varied factors: (a) the accumulation of practical knowledge, (b) the teacher's own personality including the willingness to seek help, (c) the manner in which expectations were reconciled with reality, and (d) the capacity to reflect on personal growth, integrating aspects of the year's experience to determine what is and is not important.

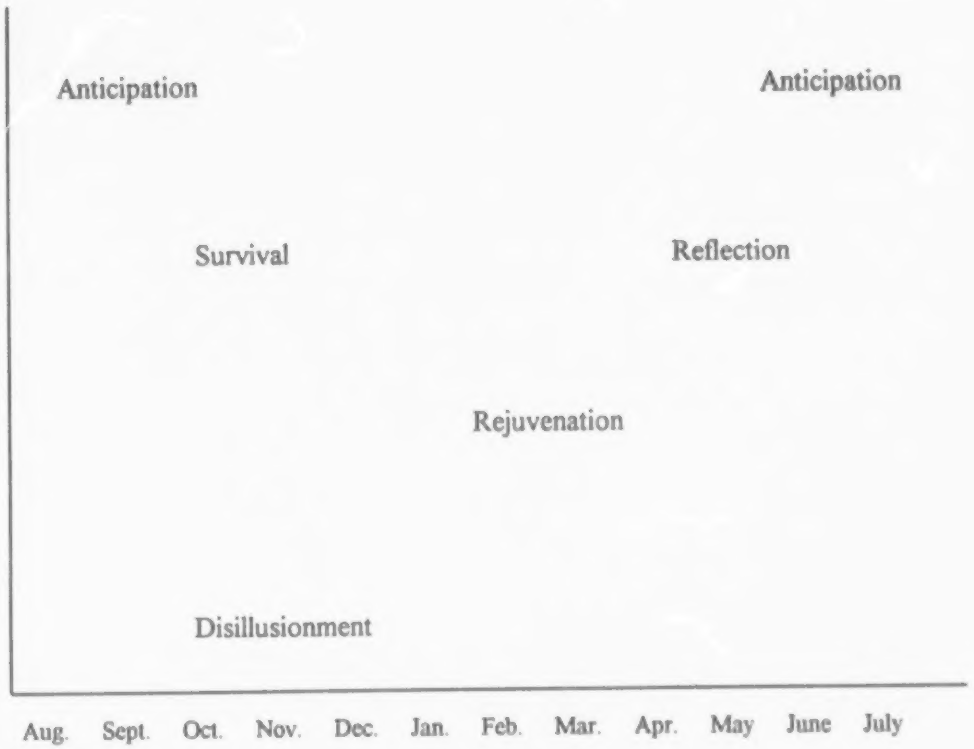

Figure 3. Phases of first-year teachers' attitudes toward teaching. Source: Ellen Moir, Director of Santa Cruz Consortium New Teacher Project, cited in A Guide to Prepare Support Providers for Work with Beginning Teachers, The California New Teacher Project.

Acquiring Practical Knowledge

Berliner (1988) notes that during the first stage of skill development, a teacher's behavior tends to conform to the rules and procedures they were told to follow. During those early months, simply living as a teacher while learning the context of the teaching situation is paramount.

Sharon spoke earlier of not knowing how to fill out report cards but also noted, "I didn't know how to decorate a room. I didn't know how to do any of that stuff. I came here a brand new teacher without knowing how basically to do a classroom setting. I didn't know about attendance; I didn't know about finding a sub[stitute teacher], I didn't know where to take money when the kids have a lunch charge. I didn't know where to take the kids to go to [physical education] or where to go for music."

Across all teachers, learning the system was an accomplishment worth noting. Barbara reflected that one of the greatest frustrations was "not knowing the ropes" but observed, "That comes with time, learning the ins and outs and how the district itself is organized and who the channels are that I go through. But I think that's with anyone."

Nancy learned the system with her map, going from school to school delivering services to students with hearing impairments. In the process she gained knowledge of how differently IEP meetings could be conducted and IEP's written and developed a style of her own that reflected what she did and did not like.

Teachers who entered the classroom with multiple endorsements across both general and special education brought a broader perspective of the classroom and of instruction. This often provided a basis from which to problem solve because they started their teaching with more points of knowledge from multiple student teaching experiences.

Personality of the Teacher

Barbara and Sharon spoke of being flexible people, of "going with the flow," of wanting "to leave myself open to experience everything." Brenda, who did not see herself as particularly flexible, acknowledged that her personal style of high standards for herself and others may have increased her anxiety and frustration: "Sometimes [it] can be a problem. If things don't go the way I am envisioning them to go, then I take that as my own fault; and I see fault in myself. That might be just a first-year teacher thing, too. I just needed to relax and realize that I had to go with the flow and let things happen. I needed to be more flexible."

A willingness to seek new ways to teach to children's needs was a constant in teachers who finished the year positively. This was accomplished through seeking answers from others or committing personal time to additional training or reading the literature. Mary says, "I read a lot and there were so many inservices [for teachers of autism] that, by the end [of the year], I knew what I was doing. I felt confident in what I was doing because they trained us."

Leslie says, "My mentor told me, 'It's so easy to be your mentor because you love everything I suggest.' I kind of have that background where I wanted to learn so much, so whatever she said was just addition to what I knew. I really enjoy what I do, and I can't wait to discover [and try] different things that apply in my classroom." Betsy noted, "I went to a lot of inservices, and I learned a new definition for communication. I learned to think of communication as more than just verbal output, as more than just two people conversing. I learned that just facial gestures for some kids is their form of communication. So I learned to think more broadly about that term."

Teachers in this research tended to be proactive in seeking help rather than waiting for it to come, thereby acting to control their situation and manage the inherent stress. In addition to seeking help from colleague educators, they reached out to parents as partners and logical supports. This allowed them to expand the teaching role to one of modeling and building expertise in the child's primary environment. When the goals, expectations, and strategies for a child cross environments, the transitions between home and school are not so dramatic each day. The teacher's work is enhanced, and the student progresses more predictably.

Nancy was undaunted by the prospect of responding to parents whose grief, disappointment, and anger she could not share. She was successful not by addressing those reactions directly but by seeking instructional assistance and working intensively with the student throughout the year, helping his parents to see what he was capable of doing and how certain resources and modifications could allow him to prosper.

Reconciliation of Expectations with Reality

The teachers' expectations for the year often reflected, understandably, their training and student teaching; but those expectations had to be reconciled with reality as the year went on for the teacher to emerge with a resolution to remain in the field. Mary expected to include her students in the general classroom but experienced frustration making that happen. "I just wanted it so bad, and I tried so hard; but a couple of times the children just needed to come out. That was very frustrating for me because I always felt that there was a way . . . so I tried to always figure out what it was that set them off and how we could change that. That was frustrating for me that I had to remove them sometimes." She had seen that a general education classroom that was not prepared for inclusion lacked the flexibility in use of resources and teacher planning that are essential for inclusion to work. She knew by mid-year she would be transferring to general education to facilitate it from that perspective.

Nancy expected to work in a self-contained classroom with fewer children whose hearing impairments were severe; that had been her student teaching experience. She came to see her itinerant role, however, as one that provided her a broader knowledge of the school district, its processes, and resources than other new teachers gained. She, herself, became a resource to others.

Claudia expected the paperwork to be "terrible" because in her training program she had heard that. Although the paperwork did turn out to be that bad, her myriad sources of support reduced her fears and allowed her to manage the intricate legal processes even as the district implemented elements of the 1997 amendments to IDEA. Barbara, though, spoke of not having any expectations, but of wanting to "dive in with the kids," to "be thrown in somewhere and just start." Leslie felt well prepared from her graduate program and two years of work as an instructional assistant; but she also had realistic expectations, keeping in mind her teacher friend's advice: "[She] always told me, 'No matter how prepared you are, these kids are so different. No matter how perfectly you create your classroom, you have to make adaptations every chance you have.' "

Personal Growth

Betsy was clear about how she had changed as a teacher during the first year. "Working with special education students, you learn so much about yourself. It really is a learning tool for me to grow as a person. I'm more focused, more patient. I'm just a calmer person because of what I do. I realize that [the children] have a reason for their behavior, and it's lack of communication. So there is really no reason for me to be so high-strung like I used to be. It's taught me a lesson. Now, I am not saying I am perfect. I mean, there are days when I find myself losing my patience but I just kind of take a step back and say, 'I am here for them.' I just need to put my own emotions aside and just do my job."

Betsy learned throughout the year that, from a practical standpoint, she could not do everything; there were some things that "would just have to go undone. That's something they can't really teach you in school. I guess in any career you go in and you just have to figure it out for yourself. I wanted to make visuals for my kids and didn't have time even to tell my assistant how to do it. So you've got that and your IEP meetings and then you have parents that want to come in and talk to you, and you just have all these things going at the same time. Even if things are going really well in the classroom, things arise that are problematic, that you have to take care of. Trying to fit those into the schedule and not feel that you're not neglecting your kids. It's just a lot."

For Leslie, "Working in this field is just totally humbling. I mean humbling. I love, I thought I'd always love children, I thought I was always patient, but this stretched me in every way. It challenged me to be a better person. . . ."

Phases of Developing Into a Teacher

When a teacher has reached Berliner's (1988) stage three of development, she has moved through the stage of sorting the contextual aspects of the environment and making decisions about when to follow the rules and when to ignore them. She has moved on to making choices and plans and determining what is and what is not important. She has a sense of controlling her own classroom through the decisions she makes herself. Alison, who spoke with me at the beginning of her second year of teaching, captured it best. "I would say I've changed a lot personally--just knowing what to do. Last year, whenever anyone would tell me what to do, I would just think, 'This is okay.' Now, though, I feel like I have a little more knowledge to say, 'No, that's not right. What about this?' I feel like last year I was kind of floating along as far as suggestions or administrative sort of things, sort of 'Okay, this is what I should be doing now.' Now, if [the administrator] would tell me that my schedule, like art time, has been changed for the fourth time and I just had to deal with it, I'd say, 'My schedule can't just be changed like that.' Last year I took it as, well, that's the way it's going to be. This year, though, I'm looking out for the kids more. And I think this year I know that I don't have to just go with it. I have a different perspective now. These kids should be coming first."

Fuller and Brown (1975) note that experienced teachers help new teachers survive this stressful period of their professional lives. Although, as seen earlier, the new teachers in this research ultimately developed rich networks of support, they reported gratitude upon arriving in the school district to discover that mentors had been assigned to them. Brenda says, "I thought it would be wonderful [to have a mentor]. I thought it would be someone who would guide me through all, someone that would be there for me when I needed that person to show me what they do in their classroom, give me some techniques and strategies that worked for them, tell me about their experiences. You know, just day to day things that I [would deal] with, like if this person was butting heads with this person or a parent was upset about something and I needed someone to talk to. I kind of felt that a mentor/teacher would be that person for me to go to. I had that kind of relationship in mind." Although Brenda's mentorship relationship ultimately fell short of what she envisioned, her image of its need and value for her speaks to the new teacher's awareness that help will be needed.

New teachers are idealistic, progressive, liberal, and willing to think beyond the confines of their own experiences as students. They bring a missionary zeal to the classroom. Without support that validates their efforts, sustains their methods, and assures them of their capacity to attain their goals for students, their confidence sags. They back away from democratic teaching styles, move from student-centered to authoritarian instruction, and demonstrate the tendency to abandon new strategies that are not instant successes and that they see as not working. They revert to earlier models of teaching that they themselves experienced (Veenman, 1984). They may remain in teaching but not as confident professionals who are life long learners.

Dr. Greg Ciardi, a mentor trainer with Teachers 21 in Boston, Massachusetts, employs a model of mentor support that focuses on merging the mentor's own style of mentoring with the needs of the new teacher throughout the growth phases of the first year and, hence, enhances the likelihood that the new teacher will continue with more liberal, child centered instruction. The model reflects the changing role of the mentor in retaining responsibility for what is going on in the new teacher's classroom and for the relationship between the two.

The mentor moves through phases of telling the new teacher what is necessary and appropriate for the school and district, suggesting and modeling activities and modifications, collaborating with the new teacher to induce decision making and innovation, and finally supporting decisions through reinforcement of effective practices and thinking. The new teacher's growth, when supported, follows this continuum even with the personal variations of time in each phase and reversals brought about when unusual circumstances appear. The mentor adjusts to the needs of the new teacher, choosing activities and responses that are appropriate for the phase in which the new teacher exists while being sensitive to the ultimate need to have the new teacher assume responsibility for the classroom and be independent in making decisions and long range plans with the children's needs in mind.

Mary spoke movingly of the morning she had to tell her mentor that she was not returning to special education the next year and of her mentor's role in that conversation. "I really didn't want to tell her for some reason, and I felt really awful about it. I am ready to cry right now. I didn't want to tell her because I thought she would think that I was copping out. So at our last meeting, I said, 'Dee, I'm going to general ed,' and she said, 'I knew, it's okay. I knew something would have to change for you.' Then she kind of helped me along with the rest of it; and we talked about going to schools where there were autism classes, and she offered to write me a recommendation. She really understood, she did."

EMERGING AS A TEACHER

Brenda

I have this one little girl who cries and cries and screams and screams, pinches, bites, kicks--how do you get through to a child like this? What makes her happy? That was my big challenge. All I wanted was to get her to sit in my circle. It didn't matter if she just sat there for five minutes just to humor me. All I wanted was for her just to sit in my circle time. I tried everything. I put her in a chair and would start with her first, but all of a sudden she would start crying and screaming, crying and screaming. She would get up and move around. It was just a mess. Well, she liked green peppers; so I thought, 'Okay, how am I going to do a behavior modification program with a little girl who [has] very, very low cognitive functioning but likes green peppers.' So, I started this mini-behavior program where I cut up green peppers every day before circle time and I had them sitting on my little tray. I started out [expecting her to sit] for 30 - 45 seconds. If she sat there for 30 seconds without crying she got a green pepper. If she got a green pepper, she was happy. When she had sat there without crying for another 30-45 seconds, I'd give her another piece. It was amazing how she responded to this. I have gotten her to the point where she can sit throughout a full circle [activity] without crying and I have weaned her off of the green peppers. I have them there, but I give her one only when I can tell that she is getting agitated. At other times during the day when I knew she was likely to be fussy, I would put her in a rocking chair. One of the assistants would sit behind her and every time that she would start to cry she would rock her, and for some reason the rocking took the focus away from why she was upset or agitated. So, I just had to try things that I thought would make it better for her so she could learn.

[It's been hard this year, too] because I came from a school of thought that was nothing but inclusion. That's what I was trained in. I was always preaching it and up on my high horse, but I didn't do any of it this year because there was so much going on; and it was hard. The kids had never been integrated before; I was a first-year teacher; I didn't know anybody; I didn't know which teachers to go to; I didn't know which classrooms would be appropriate to integrate my kids; I didn't even know my kids yet! But that's going to change next year. Our school will be part of an early childhood collaboration project that I'm looking forward to. It'll give us a chance to include my kids with kindergarten and Headstart. It will give me a chance to see how I can improve my kids and make adaptations and accommodations that I haven't had an opportunity to do this year.

It's just been a real, real hard year for me. I did have an experience working with moderate retardation and severe disabilities when I was student teaching; but it's just been a hard year. The nature and the severity of the disability on a day-to-day basis, it gets hard. A lot of times I felt I wasn't making any progress, and I was just doing the work just to do it. But, then again, there were those days when a light bulb would go off and it would be like wow, maybe I am doing something right. So, it's definitely been a learning experience. Definitely. I've learned a lot about people, I've learned a lot about professionalism; I've learned a lot about my kids; I've learned a lot about parents; I've learned a lot about myself and my expectations for myself. A lot of times I feel that I am too hard on myself and I just kind of--I mean, the first three months of school I was there until 7, 7:30, 8 o'clock at night. I still am on occasions, but I am learning to balance it all out. I am learning to have a life outside of school. So all in all it's been a good year. It's been a very difficult one because I faced a lot of challenges that I've had to work through. In a way, though, I am almost, you know, glad that all of these things have been thrown at me because it just made me realize that, 'Hey, I am capable of doing this! I am capable of problem solving and working with a team, and being professional. And, I'll sleep really good this summer!"

Figure 4. Case study: Brenda.

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CHAPTER 7

Continuing the Journey

Introduction

This chapter contains an overview of the study, an application of findings to the research questions, the fundamental diversity of the research participants and the relevance of that to research findings. Recommendations for new teacher support and retention that emerged from the study are offered. My concluding comments are here as well as a final vignette reflecting a new teacher's growth and decision to remain in the field.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze through qualitative research methods new special educators' perceptions of the impact of a mentorship on their decisions to remain in the field of special education when a mentorship is designed according to best practices and provided during the first year of teaching in a special education role. In addition to that central question, two additional research questions were addressed, (a) what characteristics of the mentorship had the greatest influence on your development of self-confidence and sense of competence as a teacher? and (b) what were the influences of the mentorship during the first year of teaching?

The data provided insight into the varied paths that led participants to the field of special education, expectations of these new special educators, the activities within their mentorships, supports that supplemented the mentorship, the evolution of these young women as teachers, and the decisions to remain in or leave the field of special education. Of particular interest is the powerful emotional commitment and bonding that these special educators exhibited for their students.

Data from the site of the research reflect over time that 12-13% of new special educators leave the field of special education after the first year. In this study of 9 new teachers, those data were upheld. One teacher transferred to general education after her first year of teaching; the other 8 remained in the field of special education for a second year. Eight of the 9 new teachers stated that their mentors increased the development of their self-confidence and sense of competence as a teacher. This was done as mentors met new teacher needs to have someone to provide advice and counsel that was nonjudgmental and to validate their competence and value as teachers. Mentors tended to influence the new teachers through the power of their knowledge, experience, and empathy.

Application of the Findings to the Research Questions

Research question 1. Did the mentorship you had during your first year of teaching have an impact on your decision to remain in the field of special education for a second year? In only two cases did the new teachers included here believe that their mentors had clearly influenced their return to the field of special education. For Nancy, who worked her first year as an itinerant teacher for students with hearing impairments, her mentor's organization, knowledge of the system, and dedication to a colleague relationship allowed her to have a regular touchstone in the absence of a school. Her mentor's organization provided a framework within which to fit all the details of instructing students in many schools and prevented Nancy from feeling overwhelmed. It was the relationship the mentor forged, however, that allowed Nancy to feel that she was valued. "Even from the beginning [my mentor] would say, 'I'll show you what I do, but show me what you're going to do so I can learn.' I never felt that she was telling me what to do. When I'd take classes, she'd ask, 'What did you learn?' and then she'd say 'Oh, I didn't know that,' and then she'd write it down. She always asked me what I thought about something. I think if she had not been there when I had so many difficult issues, I would have said, 'I can't do this,' so I definitely think she had a part in my coming back." For Leslie, whose growth and relationship with her mentor will be detailed in the vignette later in this chapter, her mentor was a strong physical presence during an unusually difficult first quarter. Throughout those months, she constantly pointed out for Leslie the good choices she was making, the progress of her students, and the positive feedback she was receiving from other teachers and the building administrators. She never allowed Leslie to lose sight of the preponderance of good that was happening even as Leslie chaired IEP meetings with inclusion advocates and heard a teacher speak openly and disparagingly about her students. "[My mentor] had a tremendous impact on my first year. Other people would call with helpful advice, but she came to me. She was always there, and I knew I was never alone."

Five of the remaining six participants who returned to special education spoke warmly of their mentors and the indirect impact they had on decisions to remain in the field. In each of those cases the mentor's role had been supplemented and enhanced by a network of support developed over the year. That network included the school's administrators, other teachers, and district administrative staff. In the end, from the perspective of those five teachers, the extensive network of support and the teachers' own commitment to the children they were teaching were responsible for the decision to remain in special education. While new teachers spoke about the mentor being the person they sought out for information or instructional support early in the school year, they noted that as the year went on and their own circle of relationships broadened, they often consulted with a broader group of colleagues. Even as that was occurring, however, the participants spoke of the security of knowing the mentor was always there as a source of support and expertise.

When the mentor was not a direct influence on the teacher's decision to remain in the field, she often was used as a sounding board for decisions about changing schools or grade levels and what the procedures were for doing that. The mentors brought to those discussions a sensitivity to the political culture of the district in those decisions. Did leaving a school after one year give future principals the impression of a teacher who lacked loyalty? At some future time, would a move to another grade level or school signify a lack of "staying power"? What kind of growth would occur if a teacher remained for another year with the same group of students as opposed to moving to another grade? Although the new teachers had enlarged their circles of support and friendship, the mentors continued to bring to the relationship the assurance of confidentiality and commitment to the new teacher as an evolving professional. Their advice was more powerful and carried greater import.

For Mary, who chose to leave special education for a third grade general education class, her mentor allowed her to be comfortable with the decision. She counseled Mary about schools that would offer her the environment to pursue her inclusive philosophy and offered to write recommendations. In doing so, her mentor provided, as she had throughout the year, the support Mary needed to meet the expectations she had for her class of young students. "I did want the kids [to be included] with general education kids, and [my mentor] really did help me along with that even though I don't think that that's necessarily what she would have done. I think we thought differently on that, but she did help me make adaptations for the kids in the [general education] class and figure out how to talk to the teachers so it would work." Her mentor put her own needs and feelings aside to help Mary accomplish her goals, even as she knew she was indirectly assisting her to transfer to general education.

Of all the new teachers, Brenda had the only unsatisfying relationship with her mentor; and she reported that the mentor had no impact on her decision to return to the field. Her mentor had responded to Brenda's needs in ways that Brenda felt were condescending and judgmental, and she felt threatened by her. She noted that she got the nurturing she needed from other people on her team and accomplished her expectations for the children through consultation with the team members who provided services to children in her class.

Research question 2. What characteristics of the mentorship had the greatest influence on your development of self-confidence and sense of competence as a teacher? A teacher's sense of competence is closely aligned with the progress of the students. Although these teachers came to their first year of teaching with expectations that varied from nonexistent to very specific, they all expected to have a positive impact on their students. Time and again the teachers experienced the most anxiety, frustration, and bewilderment when they found themselves without the skills or knowledge to help a student proceed. Sharon spoke of not knowing how to teach a certain child to read. Claudia did not know how to bring a young girl's destructive and disruptive behavior under control. Alison could not disengage a young boy from another child to whom he was unusually attached. Nancy was faced with a deaf child who was foundering because he had never been taught to sign, although he had been included in a regular class for years in another state. In each case, the teacher ended her description of the situation with, "I didn't know what to do!"

In those mentorships where a valued relationship had developed, the teacher sought advice from the mentor to improve the situation for a child and, in doing so, to feel more confident and competent as a teacher. Those mentorships had become valued relationships because the mentor came into the new teacher's life as friend and colleague, not evaluator. The mentor had been unfailingly accessible and available. She brought knowledge of the children that the teacher was instructing, and she respectfully and nonjudgmentally accepted the feelings the new teacher had about the situation. She offered advice without directing and kept an open mind about the teacher's expectations. She listened and passed tissues and nodded and listened and cared and listened. She reinforced the good work that was being done, came to observe and give feedback, took the teacher to see classes where the thing the teacher wanted most to have happen was happening, and introduced the new teacher to resources that could help when the mentor could not. Through it all, she came to be a trusted colleague who the teacher knew supported her in helping the children to succeed and, as a result, helped her grow into a self-image of competence and value.

While most new teachers expressed the desire that their mentors be in the same school with them, the relationships described above developed even when that was not the case. They developed also within and without regularly scheduled meetings. Only one new teacher kept a log, although several kept a running list of questions to be asked at the next meeting with their mentors. One had had the chance to pick her mentor because she had been at the school as a substitute at the end of the previous school year and knew the staff. Each of the others had been told who her mentor was and expressed no particular disappointment with not having had the chance to choose herself. Mary laughed as she said, "You know, to be honest, [since school was starting] I didn't think, 'Oh, I want to pick my own mentor,' I really didn't think about it that way. Since all of the autism teachers in our building were new, we didn't have any mentors in the school, so I was more worried that I wasn't going to have any mentor. I wasn't thinking, 'Oh, I didn't get to choose my mentor,' I was just happy that I had one!"

Research question 3. What were the influences of the mentorship during the first year of teaching? Mary held my attention as she looked at me and said, "My mentor was absolutely inspiring. I couldn't believe the things that she has done, the ideas she had. Just going into her classroom was wonderful!"

Not all mentors come, as this one did, with 25 years of teaching in the field and the credentials and qualities of a world-class triathlete. She inspired and influenced though, as did other mentors, through her example of commitment to children whose needs are complex and demanding, her demonstration that a teacher grows through constantly learning herself, and her model of support to the new teacher and others in the field.

Influence to do what, though? We have seen that, even in mentorships designed with best practices in mind, the mentor's direct impact on the teacher's decision to remain in the field of special education is not predictable but often only a part of the new teacher's larger environment of work, other relationships, and personal goals. Teachers told me that the mentor's philosophy of education did not necessarily sway them from their own visions of teaching. The mentor's support of a teacher in reaching the goals of her vision provided influence, however, in developing respect for others' ideas and values. The mentor relinquished the opportunity to influence instruction or processes when she did not have the answer. She did influence by example, though, the value of collaboration and cooperation when she sought the answer from another.

These and other influences of a mentorship on a first-year teacher are subtle and hard to capture. What emerged from this research, however, was the sense from new teachers that their evolution as teachers had been influenced by the mentorship, on occasion alone but often as the linchpin of a network of support. That network had encouraged and cajoled and validated the evolving teacher from the height of anticipation in September through the lows of disillusionment in December to the reflection and return of anticipation in the spring. Without it, as several told me, they would have concluded, "I can't do this."

Difference is Fundamental

Maxwell (1996b) succinctly captures postmodernism as the concept that difference is fundamental rather than superficial and then applies it to the methodologies of research. He rejects the biases of research that diminish or ignore variations within a population or use collection and analysis methods that yield shared themes or concepts to the exclusion of specific differences. Utilizing any of these research methods denies the emergence, study, and validation of the unique aspects of the population studied. It is those differences, though, that provide an understanding of the complexity of the human experience and the unique aspects of individuals that generate decisions and behaviors.

This perspective on the analysis of research data is unsettling at best. Researchers seek to draw conclusions, establish foundations upon which future research can build, generalize from the commonalities of the population. To approach research with the expectation that, in the end, one will have only individual stories to tell begs the question of what value is the process. To enter the research, however, with a curiosity about how the diverse profiles of participants interacted with events allows for an understanding of the choices each participant made in responding to like events or experiences within a common environment. It reveals and values the richness of individual human experiences while establishing the individuals' commonality as participants in a larger culture.

This perspective is particularly applicable to this research as it provides a framework for understanding the manner in which each of the teachers used her mentor, reached out to develop other support systems, revealed her personality, integrated the year's events, and drew conclusions about short and long term goals.

The teachers in this study had no common reason for entering the field of special education. One had known since childhood that she wanted to teach children with hearing impairments. Several had experienced life altering experiences that presented randomly, not as the result of any systematic career plan. Yet another had fought her entry into the teaching profession, wanting to break the family mold of teaching but ultimately succumbing to its pull on her. Others entered special education after expecting to be general education teachers but being intrigued by the potential to change the future for one child or a group of children who had been born to lives that were not easily accommodated by others.

They came with diverse personal styles that facilitated at different rates their evolution as teachers. Those who were gregarious and effusive embraced their environments, seeking out their mentors, expanding their contacts, sorting out the structure of the system, insisting that others help them. Those whose natures were less so evolved more tentatively, using their mentors less when they were not easily accessible and relying on them more when they were immediately available.

The teachers' training spanned experiences with diverse populations to the narrow focus on one area of disability. Some were emboldened by their training to come to their first year of teaching with expectations that their students would be included in general classrooms; but others had no such philosophy, saying that they knew immediately that their students would not be "mainstreamed."

Their diversity and unique histories precluded drawing generalities about their first year of teaching; for each teacher brought that personal amalgam to the experience, each interacting with a group of children that was in itself unique from all others. The teachers all came, however, with a commitment and passion that, at times, were startling. While their need for extensive concrete support emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews, the most compelling aspect of this research was the commitment to the education of their young students that each revealed in her responses and remarks. Their passion in seeking help for themselves and, as a result, for their students pervaded the interviews and provided a window to understanding the choices they made, even as those choices reflected their diversity.

Recommendations Emerging from the Study

The Council for Exceptional Children's What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Certification of Special Education Teachers (1994) includes as Standard IV the requirement that a mentor be provided for every special educator during the first year in the field or in a new teaching role. The value of that support has been demonstrated through the responses of participants in this research. Although the impact of the mentor on the new special educator's decision to remain in the field is seen to be not wholly direct but often indirect, the importance of counsel from an experienced special educator who is easily accessible and physically available has been acknowledged. Even when a new teacher's network of support has expanded over a year's time, the importance of the mentor's perspective, knowledge, and role as trusted colleague remains.

New teachers in this study spoke of the contribution to their self-confidence and sense of professional competence that mentors made by advising them about teaching strategies and interventions. The need to develop additional skills, specific for the children being instructed and their unique needs, often results because training was generic or outside of the teaching assignment and student teaching experiences were inadequate. The mentor becomes an extension of the preservice training program and a vital link to building the teacher's repertoire of knowledge and skills. A teacher feels competent when the students are making progress and meeting IEP goals because of strategies brought by the teacher. Teachers who do not acquire this sense of competence and self-confidence in the first year of teaching are less inclined to remain in the field.

Mentors have a special status that brings the opportunity to engage the teacher in reflecting on what has gone before and what is possible in the future. This provides a framework for the new teacher to see herself as an evolving professional, experiencing expected phases of development while anticipating her place in the field over time.

Considering both the literature on retention, attrition, and support for new special educators and the results of this study, the following recommendations seem plausible for further research and activities related to maintaining an experienced special education teacher pool:

1. The school district involved in this study should maintain longitudinal data on the retention of special education teachers who have had the benefit of the best-practices mentorship designed by the district. This data would add considerably to the minimal research base on retention interventions.

2. Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) should consider the contributions that identified mentors could make as colleagues in Professional Development Schools.

3. Dissemination of the insights of this study, through written and oral means, to appropriate journals, teacher educator groups and state Comprehensive System for Personnel Development (CSPD) coordinators would heighten the possibility of mentorships being more regularly considered as components for new teacher support planning.

Comments and Conclusions

The children taught by those in this study were fortunate. They had teachers who had come to the field of special education because of a deep caring for their students' futures. They stayed to teach them and other children because they preferred the individual nature of special education, the opportunity to work closely with each child, and the impact they knew was largely theirs. The teachers all recognized that the classrooms of tomorrow will more and more include children with special needs, and they worked to prepare schools for that so their students and those who came after could take their place in those classes supported and taught by teachers who understood their needs. The district provided the support the teachers needed--in many forms and through significant commitment of resources. In the end, however, Betsy said it best: "This is where my heart is. This is my career. I enjoy what I do because of the type of child I work with--it's the children that keep me here."

A Born Teacher: A Teacher Born

Leslie

The summer after my first year in college, I had the opportunity to work with a therapeutic recreation program in our area. That experience not only opened my eyes but challenged me in ways that I'd never been challenged before. It was the hardest thing I had ever done; and when I left at the end of the summer, I told myself I would never do this again because it drained me emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, physically in every way. I had never been around people with disabilities so that was a unique experience for me.

But, throughout that winter and springtime I just couldn't forget what happened to me and all the things I experienced. I started thinking about the children I had worked with. . . and I couldn't wait to get back. So it's been very, very traumatic experience for me--how I came into the field. But ever since then I knew this was something I wanted to do, and I couldn't stop reading more and more about autism.

So, I finished college and worked for two years as an aide in an autism classroom and then went back to grad school for two years. It was a triple certification program because I wanted to be knowledgeable about regular ed and then I got to work with children who speak English as a second language and then with preschool children with special needs.

So I guess for four years I have been thinking about what I would do when I had my own class. Of course, I was nervous about it; but I felt prepared. Well, I can't say that it was easy. All my kids came with advocates from the preschool program, but I didn't know that until people from the district office started calling me and suggesting that the class be split. Well, by then I had already visited all my parents and didn't want to change my kids. So, I did have big, very difficult first quarter because I had to deal with whatever things were left from preschool. So the advocates came to the kindergarten program, and it didn't matter what I was doing--they already had issues they wanted to deal with in the district. So I did cry at night, and I did have crises--it was beyond whatever I had thought of or heard.

But I had support from my mentor who was there from day one and came almost every day after school just to conference with me and to prepare me for my IEP meetings. I have to say that I have the most supportive principal and assistant principal. They have told me how proud they are of the way I was taking care of my students. They come to my classroom and are amazed at the progress my students are making verbalizing and imitating things. They say that they know the way I structure my classroom is definitely benefitting my students.

And although I loved last year, the first quarter, I don't think I could have emotionally dealt with the things I had to deal with without my mentor. I cried with her, and she would tell me over and over that it was going to be okay. She would say, 'Leslie, believe me this is a hard IEP, this is very difficult, don't think that its going to be like this every year. It's very difficult. You're just hit with a very difficult situation.' So, I'd call her and she always came. She made my first year a very positive experience. If I thought I had to do it all by myself that first quarter with all I had--I don't know. But she was there, a physical presence in my classroom, and she made me realize I was not alone.

She would always tell me, 'We really need teachers like you, I want you to survive, I want you to come back, I know you can come back. There are not many teachers who are willing to survive these difficult situations. They need you here.' That made me very significant, not in my classroom only but in the district. She made me feel like I am important. That was very important to me, to hear that. She encouraged me tremendously.

I really love what I do. I love my children. I communicate with their parents daily letting them know how excited I am to see this and that. I think it really helps them to know that I'm not here just as a job. I mean I don't think anyone could do this if you think this is a job. That experience with therapeutic recreation--it changed my life. It's not something you can just kind of put behind you. I love the fact that I'm in the field; I love the fact that I am experiencing something that maybe many people all around the world do not experience. I think I'm very lucky."

Figure 5. Case study: Leslie.

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Appendixes

APPENDIX A

Mentoring Training Series, 1997-1998

Session	Date	Content
1	September 30	Overview of Course Needs of Beginning Teachers Phases of the First Year of Teaching Role of Mentor Qualities of a Good Mentor
2	November 4	Mentoring Styles Matching Mentoring Styles to Needs And Phases of Beginning Teachers
3	December 2	The Logic of Lessons Lesson Design Assessment
4	February 3	Expectations: Implementing the Belief that "All Children Can Learn"
5	March 24	Advocating for Beginning Teachers Conflict Resolution
6	April 21	Reflection on the Year of Mentoring Goals for Next Year
7	June 1	Celebration: Mentors and Beginning Teachers

APPENDIX B

Initial Letter to Participants

(Name
Street Address
City, State)

Dear

The new teacher support program offered through Fairfax County Public Schools provided a mentor to you throughout last year. As part of research for a doctoral dissertation at George Mason University (GMU), I am studying the impact of the mentor during your first year of teaching and hoping you will participate in that research.

If you agree to participate, I will conduct an audiotaped interview with you for approximately one hour at a site of your choosing. That interview will be followed several weeks later by a phone call during which you may add any additional observations and verify certain points of my analysis of the earlier taped interview. I do not and will not know the name of your mentor, and the interview questions will not require you to identify him or her.

The results of the interview, including the tape recording itself and my notes taken during the interview and phone call, will remain confidential in my possession; only I will have access to them. The resulting report will not identify you, your school, your mentor, or the children with whom you work. Your principal is not a part of this research. At the conclusion of the project, the audio tapes will be erased. If you desire a copy of the research results, I will be glad to send one to you.

There are no costs to you or any other party; and, since your participation is voluntary, you may withdraw from the research at any time.

The GMU Office of Sponsored Programs and its Human Subjects Research Board has reviewed this project using the university's procedures governing your participation in research. The Fairfax County Public Schools' Office of Planning, Testing, and Evaluation has also approved the conditions of this research. If you have questions about the research, call the GMU Office of Sponsored Programs at 993-2295. The advisor for this research is Dr. Mark Goor, Assistant Dean of the Graduate School of Education at George Mason University. He may be reached at 993-2013.

If you are willing to participate in this research, please sign and date the attached sheet and return it to me in the elf-addressed envelope. Should you have questions that I can answer, I can be reached during the evenings and on weekends at 803-9404 or at kboyer1@gmu.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

K. Lynn Boyer

APPENDIX C

Followup Letter to Participants

(Name
Street Address
City, State)

Dear

You recently received a request for your participation in research I am doing for my doctoral dissertation. I have attached another copy of the explanatory letter and hope you will continue to consider being a part of this project.

The experience you had this year as a new special educator working with a mentor is unique. The literature includes no studies of first-year special education teachers who had your particular opportunity. Your reflections on that experience, therefore, are important. They will provide critical insights into what supports local school districts and teacher training programs should provide to new special educators to ensure that they surmount the challenges of their first year of teaching. I urge you to take this opportunity to share your experiences as a contribution to the field of research on teacher training and support.

As I noted in my earlier letter, the one-hour interview can be scheduled at your convenience in the weeks ahead at the site you prefer. I have enclosed an Agreement to Participate and a stamped return envelope. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

K. Lynn Boyer

APPENDIX D

Agreement to Participate in Research

I have read the purposes and conditions of research being planned by K. Lynn Boyer as part of a doctoral dissertation and agree to participate in the study.

Signature	Date
Home Phone	Work Phone

To be returned to:

K. Lynn Boyer
7400 Clifton Road
Clifton, Virginia 20124

APPENDIX E

New Teacher Training Series, 1997-1998

Session	Date	Content
1	September 11	Expectations of Seminar Sessions Communication with Parents Back to School Night
2	September 22	Educational Implications of Specific Disabilities Medical Issues/Policies and Procedures/Responsibilities
3	October 6	Routines and Classroom Management Developing Behavior Management Programs
4	October 27	Goal Setting for Students
5	November 17	IEP Writing/Issues Conducting an IEP Meeting
6	December 8	Data Collection and Assessment: Strategies for Record Keeping Documenting Progress/Performance Assessment ESY Services Preparing for Parent Conferences and Visits
7	January 12	Planning and Implementing an Effective Integration Program Advocating for Special Education Students in General Education Settings
8	February 9	Organizing Multilevel Instruction Differentiating Instruction
9	March 2	Adapting Instruction with Technology
10	March 23	Coordinating Services Across Disabilities Promising Practices, Current Research and Trends
11	April 14	Classroom Management
12	May 4	Collegial Sharing: Effective Teaching Strategies Relevant Issues and Concerns
13	June 1	End-of-Year Reflection and Celebration

CURRICULUM VITAE

Katherine Lynn Williams Boyer, a citizen of the United States, received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1966 from Mary Washington College of the University of Virginia, Fredericksburg, Virginia. She received her Master of Arts degree in (School) Psychology from George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, in 1984. She has worked in public schools as a teacher, school psychologist, and special education administrator and at the Council for Exceptional Children. Lynn's professional work has been committed to collaborative planning and training with general education as a means of preparing all teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. Lynn has been instrumental in the development of training and mentorships for new teachers of students with disabilities and has trained principals for leadership in special education.